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Everybody's

WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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HUDSON RIVER BRACKETED

by Edith Wharton

"By the time he was nineteen Vance Weston had graduated from the college of Euphoria, Illinois, where his parents then lived, had spent a week in Chicago, invented a new religion, and edited for a few months a college magazine called *Getting There*, to which he had contributed several love poems and a series of iconoclastic essays. He had also been engaged for a whole week to the inspirer of the poems, a girl several years older than himself called Floss Delaney . . . ."

. . . and then Vance Weston went to visit some distant relatives in a tiny village near New York. In this little town which had marked time while the Middle West was advancing he learnt for the first time of the wealth of literature about which he knew nothing, of the traditions that hovered over the lovely old houses—and he met Heloise Spear.

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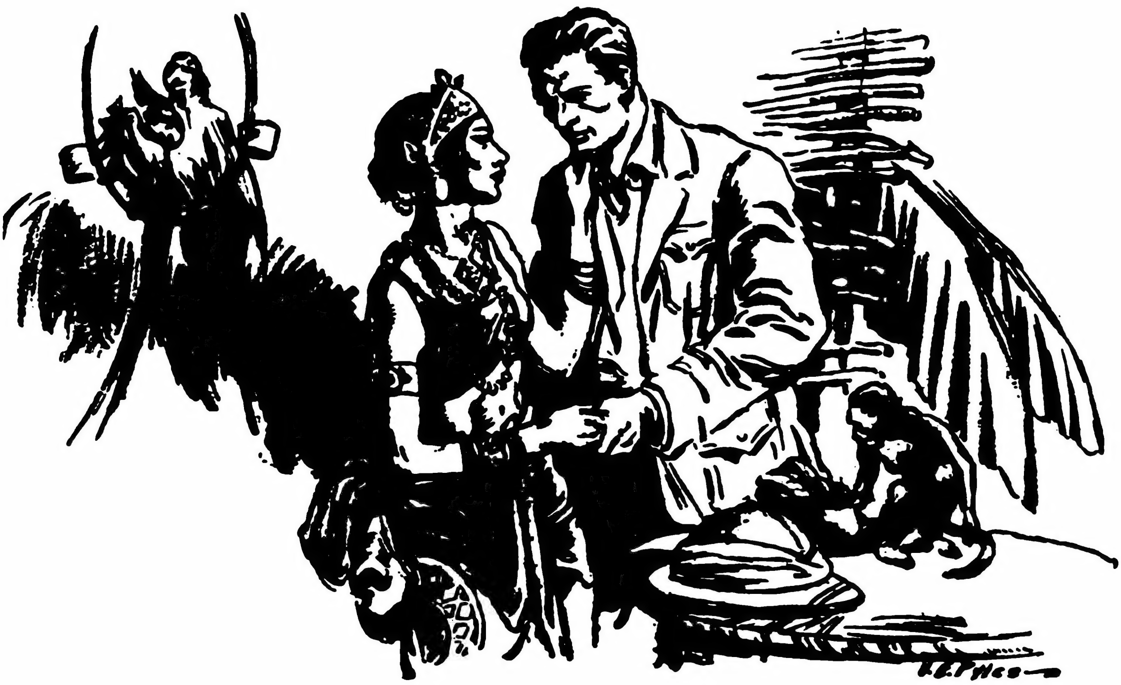


The Ironic Story of a White Man's Honor and Its Price

PAYUNG

By MURRAY LEINSTER

BURTON always did as he was told, so when somebody—a woman, most likely—told him to go to hell, he went to Payung, that being the nearest approach to Hades on this planet. And because nobody told him to go away he stayed there.

The devil designed Payung. It lies up on a nameless jungle stream about thirty miles from the Panjang Sungi, with thick jungle on two sides, the aforesaid nameless stream, which usually stank, on another side, and a mangrove swamp between the station and the coast and the surf. At night Burton would lie in his hammock and sweat, staring at the stars, and hear the long ocean waves come rolling in from the clean, open sea and splash and gurgle in the mangrove roots. They made a cool, rushing noise that reminded him of surfs into which it was a delight to dive, cool waters, and a girl who swam in them, and—well, various things which were appropriate to be thought about by a man who happened to be in hell.

Burton would lie there, with a punkah swinging over his head in the open air of the veranda, and swear wearily when the native boy fell asleep and the punkah stopped. That was Payung for you. The jungle cut off all the breezes—all of them—and there was only a hot and fetid smell from its depths, and a vague gray mist that crept out of the earth and the jungle and the mangrove swamp at dusk. The mist was fever, of course, with other things.

Monster moths with furry bodies flew heavily in that mist, dancing clumsily sometimes when the moon shone mistily overhead, and bats cavorted obscenely in the darkness, and beast noises came out of the jungle, and the surf pounded and rushed and roared among the mangrove roots. That surf was a temptation and the very latest patented improvement to hell, because it reminded Burton of things.

At first he wanted to make his way to the ocean and sit on white sand and torture himself with memories while he watched the green combers rolling statelily ashore as they had done when he watched them with a girl by his side some years—or was it only months—ago. But there was no cool white sand. Only gnarled and beastly mangrove roots, fixed in evil smelling mud. And, putting other things aside, a walk in a mangrove swamp will make charming ulcers on a man's legs that will eat away the flesh. So Burton listened to the surf from a distance and remembered.

He didn't drink. Somebody had told him not to. Which may or may not have been a good thing. He would have died with some promptitude. Which, again, might or might not have been a good thing. He stayed at Payung and did what trading was to be done, and once every two months or so his firm's schooner came around and worked a painful way into the stream and dropped anchor. And then Burton talked to white men. Two of them. One was a Norwegian who was invariably speechless from gin and limes, and the other was part Portuguese and part God knows what.

It was the Portuguese who suggested hunting. Burton had never hunted and did not particularly care to. But on a certain morning when the schooner found him shaking all over with a fever and looking precisely as a ghost should look who lived in hell, or Payung, the Portuguese told him that hunting sometimes sweated away the fever and even acclimated a man. Perhaps he meant well. Perhaps he had a second cousin once removed who wanted Burton's job. Anyhow he told Burton impressively that he should hunt. Big Game. There would be leopards, or cheetahs, or tigers. The Portuguese was vague. But there were big cats in the jungle and it would be great sport to hunt them. Burton should hunt.

Now, this is not a hunting story. Therefore there is no need to talk about Burton's hunting. With little brown men who thought him mad, he sweated through jungle trails where long lianas seemed to fling themselves across the paths while his back was turned. His men carried their jungle knives ready as a matter of course, hacking off the long strands of feverishly growing stuff that they might make their way along the standard thoroughfares of the jungle. And Burton followed them, fever ridden and shaking, hunting dutifully because he had been told to hunt.

His trading improved. Little brown men slipped down to Payung to give news of this game or that, and received small presents and grew to regard him as a benefactor. Naturally, that was good for business. He did not try to cheat them, because from his youth up he had been told not to cheat. And his reputation increased notably among the natives, and even—such things happen—there were badly complimentary notes on file concerning him in the archives of the colonial government. Payung was in the middle of a district where a white man could do a great deal of harm, if he wanted to or didn't care. Most probably there was a weary political officer who was drearily relieved that the trader at Payung was the sort that helped keep his job of maintaining peace a possible one.

Burton was liked and trusted by the natives; so the government forgot him, relievedly. And he was painstaking about his own proper duties; so his company considered him a paragon and also forgot him. He was left to go his own sweet way. And that tacit confidence in him interested a great many people of whom Burton, most likely, had never even heard.

THERE was Piang Dhulat, for instance. He thought he could use Burton to advantage and arranged for Burton to meet him. The meeting, of course, took place according to Piang Dhulat's own ideas of how such a meeting should take place. He was raja of twenty villages, a good deal of a politician and very much a man of the world. Ordinarily he shunned white men as he would the plague. But Piang Dhulat also knew what he wanted and when it was time to go after it.

Burton had been told of a tiger, had gone to hunt it, holed it up in a bamboo thicket, and the beaters went in on the other side to drive it out. They made a terrific hullaballoo. And the tiger came out very suddenly. It was a female and two snarling cubs came with it. Burton flung up his gun, snapped a shot for the lungs, and his gun missed fire. The tiger was then about twenty yards away and coming like a house afire, seeming to hold Burton responsible for all the disturbance.

And then, out of the jungle alongside of Burton, there came a roar of deafening explosions. Smoothbores, flintlocks—even matchlocks—contributed to the din. And the tigress collapsed with the ribs almost blown out of it.

Burton put down his gun and wiped his forehead. Piang Dhulat slipped quietly out into the open and held out his hand.

"Greeting, *Tuan*," he said pleasantly. "I came to watch you shoot. Many times I have watched you."

Burton felt rather like a fool.

"Umm. Thanks," he said stiltedly. "I suppose your men whanged that tiger."

Piang Dhulat nodded and ignored the incident thereafter, except for a handsome present to Burton's gun bearer for arranging the dead cartridge in the rifle. He carted Burton off to his principal village as his guest.

That, of course, was all prearranged. Piang Dhulat wanted a good deal of Burton and the first requisite was his gratitude. How much he really knew of Burton is problematic, but he was the first man who ever persuaded Burton to do something he had been told not to do. Burton had been solemnly warned not to compromise the dignity of the white race. The speechless Norwegian and the half-caste Portuguese displayed that dignity to perfection.

But—well—Piang Dhulat, though brown skinned, was a man of breeding. He claimed descent from the ancient sultans of Malacca, and tried to live up to it. Burton was treated as a princely guest, fed to repletion, lodged in luxury, and shown such shooting as would have made many men consider themselves in Paradise instead of—well, the neighborhood of Payung.

Burton went back to Payung with a good deal of liking for Piang Dhulat. He found himself thinking of that brown man sometimes at night, instead of listening to the surf on the other side of the mangrove swamp. Payung was not at all like the palace of Piang Dhulat. In the palace were soft cushions and silken hangings; frayed a little, true, and yellowed in spots, but luxurious to remember. And the air seemed cleaner, and the beastly jungle noises were intermingled with village sounds, sage talk by cooking fires, and laughter sometimes, and now and then a baby's wail.

Burton could forget the squalidness of the village. The smells were human smells, if not white man smells. The girls were comely, and they smiled at him. And Burton suddenly realized that he was desperately lonely.

He went often to Piang Dhulat's villages after that. And subtly Piang Dhulat's manner changed. He offered Burton drinks, insidious and peculiar drinks that not many white men come to taste. But Burton had been told not to drink. And that failed. And he offered Burton opium, telling him that it would be discourtesy to refuse. But opium does not affect white men as it does the Oriental. Burton had the horrors from his first pipe. If he had tried it three times more, he would have liked it. But he apologized very politely after that and went out and walked among the villagers when it was suggested.

And shortly Piang Dhulat was sending messages by many devious paths concerning Burton, and there were many hopes built upon his growing friendliness for Piang Dhulat. The truth was, of course, simply that Burton was filled with loneliness. He had grown up trained to do just exactly what he was told. And the admonitions that had guarded his youth had rather absurdly warned him against such companions as the speechless Norwegian and the half-hast Portuguese. But they had never mentioned brown skinned natives in jungle villages as persons to be avoided, nor had they warned him against being overfriendly with low country sultans who commanded five hundred kris men. In particular, they had never contemplated his becoming involved in political conspiracy against the peaceful rule of a first class Power in its Asiatic possessions. So Burton had no protection against making very much of a fool of himself.

BURTON lingered by the cooking fires, talking to the huntsmen, forgetting completely the duty of maintaining the social superiority of the white man. The girls in the village smiled at him. Sometimes they touched his sleeve tentatively. And Burton smiled back and thought of a girl who had once sat with him and watched moonlit breakers come rolling in. . . .

He did not respond to the shy advances of the girls. He probably did not realize that they were advances. He certainly did not think for an instant that Piang Dhulat had issued orders and promised huge rewards for the girl who should snare him.

He would have been alarmed had he known that. Perhaps he would have resigned himself to the loneliness which puts the finishing touch on Payung, deserting his upcountry acquaintances altogether. Which would have been wise. Because Burton was sloughing off most of a white man's way of thinking, keeping only his one invariable trait of doing just as he was told. He grew to like the native cooking, and he came to prefer the native fashion of sleeping, and he would have let his beard grow if he had not been told that he must shave every morning. On the surface, perhaps, he was just as he had been before. He had needed company. He was finding companionship among the Malays. But he was going, cold sober, through the first stages that end in a white man going native.

Piang Dhulat asked him to send letters and receive replies, by the company's schooner. He did so without question. Was not Piang Dhulat his friend? He was asked to hide a certain man in his bungalow in Payung, lest his enemies discover him. He did that, not knowing that two natives trackers in the pay of the European government were thereby deprived of a handsome reward. And Piang Dhulat watched him, and was half-convinced. But being an Oriental he could not be sure until he had reports from a woman that Burton loved.

And so, women were inconspicuously paraded before Burton. Sloe-eyed girls with skin like old ivory smiled at him. Girls with tiny and slim ankles postured casually when he drew near. Once, Piang Dhulat had a dancing girl entertain Burton in the smokily lighted palace which was built out of bamboo and had the jungle thriving noisily just outside its wall. The red glow of a brazier threw crimson gleams upon her body as she flung herself into the provocative postures of a wholly uncensored and barbaric dance. She danced for Burton, her eyes fixed upon him, her lips smiling invitingly, her breast heaving as she flung herself at his feet for a climax to the performance.

Burton smiled politely and complimented Piang Dhulat upon the quality of the performance.

The bait was wrong. Piang Dhulat did not understand. Burton was lonely. He wanted company, not merely pleasure. Of all ironic desires for a man to have in Payung or hell, Burton wanted a home. The walks in the village had come to him to mean visits to families. And Burton had been warned against the companionship of women of easy morals, but home and marriage had been held up to him as estimable institutions. The girls who smiled at him made him feel poignant longings for romance which could end as he had been told all romances should end.

In a sense, it was humorous, perhaps. Malay women are not notorious for prudery, and since half the countryside seethed with sedition and Burton was needed for that sedition's success, sheer patriotism added sparkles to the liquid eyes that were turned upon him. Besides, Piang Dhulat would probably have treated any of his subjects very impolitely if they refused Burton a daughter, or even a wife. And as Piang Dhulat's ideas of impoliteness ran to possible improvements on the bamboo shoot—which is not nice to think about—why, Burton would have had only to lift his finger to be beloved by any girl he took a fancy to.

And Malay girls are pretty girls. Slender and lissom and roundly modeled, smooth of skin and with red, half-parted lips that show gleaming, small sharp teeth between. Soft hands to touch you, and dimpled cheeks to be pressed against yours . . . Burton would have been roundly termed a fool by the speechless Norwegian or the half-caste Portuguese of the schooner.

But he merely found Payung hell, with added poignancy to his loneliness. The surf splashing insistently among the mangrove roots brought visions. That girl was married now, to someone else. Burton longed for her inexpressibly but hopelessly. But the girls who smiled upon him now. . . He began long and involved arguments with himself to prove that it would be expedient and wise to have a wife. If her skin were tinted with ivory—why not? Burton reflected gravely that he preferred the native cookery. He was used to it.

If Piang Dhulat could have read his mind, he would have laughed joyously instead of nervously biting his nails. Piang Dhulat was growing more and more uneasy. He had presumed too much upon his earlier success with Burton. Plans had been made that he did not dare go through with until he was more certain of the white man. And he could not be certain until a woman to whom Burton poured out his whole soul had repeated those outpourings to him.

MEANTIME, restlessness was being noted by the powers that were. You cannot have five thousand men anticipating a joyous war against the tax gathering government without some hint of it leaking out. Bits of truculence here; veiled hints there, dropped by bragging men to governmentally subsidized dancing girls. An undue delay in turning over an erring tribesman . . . These things were serious. The powers in authority were taking note of them, and Piang Dhulat knew it, but he dared not speak openly to Burton without having him finally in his power.

Sahnya was called in when the situation began to grow tense. Sahnya the dancing girl, of course—though the people who saw her dance were very few and very fortunate. Tales of her still run up and down the Malay coast. By little, smoking campfires, men who have seen her, brag of it and expatiate upon her charms. They liken her to *bhang*, to hemp, to the poppy smoke itself. But no man boasts of having been beloved by her. That would be too dangerous. There must have been men; but just as men do not boast of bribes received, they do not brag of Sahnya's favors. Perhaps five men in the world knew exactly what Sahnya was about; what plans were behind her smooth forehead, what hidden allegiances she held to, or what treacheries she encompassed. But those five did not talk, nor ever will. Two are dead, and one is dying, and another became a viceroy after a while, and the fifth—well, you do not have to believe this story anyhow.

She was called in when the strain was growing dangerous. And Burton went up to see Piang Dhulat, all innocence, and the servants told him that Piang Dhulat was away. He was, in point of fact, biting his fingers nervously in an inner room of the palace. And Burton met Sahnya.

One would have liked to have seen that meeting. Sahnya was very wise, with the wisdom of really beautiful women and other instruments of destruction. The other women, lacking her finesse, had striven to smite Burton with dazzling charms. Sahnya received him shrouded to the eyes in soft white stuffs. Only her eyes sparkled at him in merriment as he stammered his apologies for intruding into the room where she sat.

"Oh, stay!" She laughed a little. And there are wonderful tales about the music of Sahnya's laugh. "I am so bor-r-ed."

She spoke in English with the most delectable of accents. Burton stammered again and sat down. He was all eyes, which could see nothing because of the shrouding garments all about her.

"I 'ave not talked to a white man in—years," she told him in what was plainly joyous exaggeration. "Now tell me. You hunt . . . How is the hunting? You tr-rade . . . How is the tr-rading? I wish to listen to a white man speak again."

It was the one approach that could have melted Burton's uncertainty. The other women had smiled, hinting more or less frankly at amorous matters from the beginning. Burton had been told that he should never trifle with a girl's affections, and that settled that. He had been beautifully raised, you see, if not very suitably for a Malaysian trader. But this manner of Sahnya's was only friendliness and companionship, the companionship he had been longing for.

He fairly burst into speech, while she listened. Her eyes were at first laughing and delighted. Then they grew dreamy and sympathetic. And presently he was sitting beside her—to save talking across the room—and babbled eagerly . . . When he had told her about the girl who once had sat and watched the surf with him and told him he must ever be true to her, why, then he was finished.

Sahnya laughed when Piang Dhulat asked her nervously if she was beloved by Burton. She laughed until he grew bitterly angry. And then, still laughing, she asked what he wished Burton to do. He would do anything she desired.

"Guns," said Piang Dhulat hungrily. "Have him send for all his guns by my men."

Smiling, Sahnya put out a tiny hand from under her robe. In it was Burton's revolver, the weapon a white man simply must keep by him at all times, night and day, when he lives in a place like Payung.

"Stolen," said Piang Dhulat suspiciously.

"Ask," said Sahnya. She laughed once more.

Burton had given it to her. She had told him that she was afraid at night and in the darkness. And Burton, of course, felt fully safe in the palace of his friend, Piang Dhulat. . . .

It was just as simple as that. While Sahnya listened with a mocking smile to the further desires of Piang Dhulat, Burton was tossing sleeplessly in the darkness, revising all his arguments for taking a wife and fitting them with singular perfection to the person of Sahnya.

He told her about it the next day, and she smiled mournfully and shook her head.

"My frien'," she said sadly, "you—you do not un'erstan'."

She gave him a tiny, perfect hand. He clutched it fast. She ran her fingers swiftly through his hair, bent down, and kissed him on the cheek. He had a glimpse of her face. Only one. Then she was gone.

He went back to Payung next day. She sent him word to go. Ordered him to leave her.

AND in Payung he waited, trying to work in the daytime and lying on the veranda at night with a punkah flapping dismally above him in the open air. The gray mist rose from the jungle and things flapped heavily through it in the darkness, and the roaring of the surf beyond the mangrove swamp sounded loudly in his ears. He lay there and thought of Sahnya. He was probably a bit feverish, too, because while at first he debated with a peculiar lucidity on reasons for him to acquire a wife, after two such nights he no longer thought of marriage and children in the abstract—which he had been told should be his dominant thought when he thought of love—but was thinking only of Sahnya's eyes and her voice and the single glimpse he had had of her face.

After the third night he gave orders to prepare for a jungle trip, to Piang Dhulat's village. He was hollow eyed and strained. And in the very early morning a note was given him by one of his house boys, who said an unidentifiable native had said it was for him. Burton read four words in quaintly foreign script and trembled all over.

I love you. Wait.

And at about that same time, Sahnya was opening her eyes sleepily and listening with a drowsy smile to Piang Dhulat, who was stroking her throat with trembling fingers. And she raised a slender arm with somnolent grace and nestled it about him.

They say that Piang Dhulat was a remarkably attractive individual.

But it was yet another three days before Sahnya went to Burton. Darkness and the still and humid heat that was fever and many other things besides. Paddles on the river. A dugout grounding swiftly on the shore. A white, flying figure running to the bungalow, breathing quickly.

She slipped into Burton's arms and seemed to tremble. She whispered in his ear and he sent away the servants. And then Sahnya wept brokenly, terribly, clinging to him imploringly.

It probably does not sound sane to say that Burton went out of his head on the spot. But it happened. Sahnya smiling would charm most men, and the liquid little lilt of Sahnya's speaking voice would reduce more to a fond and doting slavery. And Sahnya wistful, and seeming innocently wise, would reduce the rest. But Sahnya weeping . . . Not more than three or four men, probably, ever saw her weep. Only that many resisted so far. And one man shot himself later on because of what she persuaded him to do, and a second was still adamant and in time became a viceroy, and a third is not going to talk about it at all. Burton was the fourth.

She gasped her tale pitifully, in terror . . . She had been sold—married—while the merest child. To a beast, a brute, who happened to be the ostensibly enlightened ruler of a native state. And she had endured unspeakable things . . . At the description of which Burton clenched his teeth and cursed deeply. Sahnya may not have drawn upon her imagination in describing her nonexistent sufferings. She probably told Burton, as having happened to her, things that simply had happened to somebody else. And she said that she had run away.

She wound up in gasping horror. The man to whom she had been sold as a wife had found her, under Piang Dhulat's protection. He could not seize her. But her girl child, her tiny, living girl child, which she had borne with her upon her flight . . . That child had been stolen and returned to its father. And now the cruel word was come that Sahnya might remain away, but that every week a finger would be cut from the girl child, and when there were no more, the hands, and then the feet. . . .

That tale alone was enough to account for what Burton did later. Sahnya as a fugitive from the raja of a native state made the demands upon his emotions that even Sahnya as the woman he loved might not have done. And Burton had been in Payung long enough to realize that her tale was in nowise impossible. A girl child, born of the slave of a native ruler . . . Why, of course the man would have no sentimental feelings about the matter. A boy, yes, if he did not have many sons. But a girl . . . Women are treated with a certain amount of lazy good nature in Malaysia, but it is not because of any exaggerated idea of their value.

And Burton knew, too, that protests to high authority would be quite useless. No imaginable search could ever produce even the body of that small girl child, if the search were made by high authority. And high authority would assuredly consider it unwise to institute such a hopeless search if the ruler announced blandly that he had never owned such a slave girl, and that assuredly there had never been a child. . . .

Burton knew all that. And besides he was maddened with love of Sahnya as only Sahnya knew how to madden a man. Burton was putty for what followed.

Sahnya, imploringly, told Burton that Piang Dhulat was the brother of her father. Given guns, he would risk the wrath of high authority and do the one possible thing—raid the palace in which the girl child was hidden, and restore it, wailing, to Sahnya. He would risk his life and his throne in the enterprise. But he believed that in that palace he would find evidences of plots and schemings that would justify him even to high authority. He would surrender himself to justice, if Burton would assist him to secure justice beforehand.

If Burton had been a man of another sort he might have reflected that no Malay, raja of twenty villages, is going to risk a rebellion for the sake of a small and squalling female niece. But Burton considered that he knew Piang Dhulat. Piang Dhulat was his friend, a man of honor. . . .

SO BURTON ran guns for him; did things as a white man that no brown man could possibly have done. In two weeks, his face a white mask of ferocity, because of his good reputation he arranged for the breaking of as cheery a small war as ever a colonial government prayed to be delivered from. He let certain *prau* slip up his entirely nameless stream, loaded to the gunwales with contraband, and covered their tracks perfectly. He swore grimly to harassed patrolling launches that no *prau* had passed or could pass above Payung. Gunboats knew that weapons were being smuggled out of half a dozen watched ports. They were trying to find them; desperately, harassedly trying to cover the coast from the China Sea down.

But Burton did not help them from Payung. He reported hearing rumors of guns landed here, and there . . . Once he was engaged in bargaining with the crew of a coasting *prau* when the cutter of a gunboat came triumphantly in after it. And Burton told them he knew the crew and often dealt with them. Their vessel was clean of contraband. But two hundred rifles were in Burton's trading shed, with an incredible lot of ammunition. And the trading shed was not searched because Burton was a white man and normally would be the first one killed in case of local trouble. He was above suspicion on that account.

Burton's reputation for the virtues that arose from always doing as he was told enabled Piang Dhulat's little war to start off more auspiciously than any similar war in a generation.

He did not know when it actually broke. He thought Piang Dhulat was working Oriental diplomacy, making promises and threats, to delay the threatened mutilation of Sahnya's girl child until his raid could take place. And Burton was seeing Sahnya daily, and nightly, and Sahnya clung to him and whispered in pain racked whispers that she loved him, loved him. . . .

And it is entirely certain that Burton did not ever become one of those men who might have boasted—if they had dared—of having won to Sahnya's favor. Because Burton was a man who would risk his life and his honor, and all such trivialities, for a woman in exact proportion to the lack of a return. But he promised himself that when the little girl child was safe. . . .

Then the war broke. A resident magistrate was nearly potted, in open court. A half company of infantry had a singularly unpleasant night of jungle fighting, with losses that made a mere massacre seem tame in comparison. There were lootings and burnings. The fighting spread like wildfire, so that it seemed that at any minute all Malaysia might catch from the flame of rebellion and go into one colossal *amok* in which no white man would be fool enough to try to live.

But this is not the history of that minor war. A column of infantry happened to be at a strategic point by pure accident, and a raja with every imaginable reason for disloyalty to the colonial government took the field and fought like a fiend in defense of it. And a certain doubtful town, at a certain critical moment, happened to be under the guns of a gunboat. . . .

So it became necessary that someone should penetrate the lines that had been thrown about the area in revolt and start a rebellion beyond those lines, which would not only pinch the line into nonexistence, but would let the fire extend and keep on spreading. And Sahnya was, of course, the only person who could do it. Piang Dhulat raged, as a man, and shrugged as a philosopher. He sent her to get Burton to take her where she wanted to go. Nobody but a white man could do it. She needed two days with one certain raja, and she could madden him to the point of declaring war on all Islam, let alone a colonial government which had already restricted his authority sharply, as a rebuke for having tried to give his whole treasury to this same Sahnya.

She went to Burton, who had not been molested at all after the war broke out. Neither by those who were in revolt, or by Sahnya herself. When Burton could no longer help them, Sahnya shrugged and went to advise Piang Dhulat on tactics. She did not bother to explain to Burton. Sahnya never bothered to explain. She did things, and, if necessary, smiled at someone afterward, which usually drove all thoughts of demanding explanations out of his head.

So Burton had been all alone, thinking, while the fighting went on that seemed such a promising revolt and during that five minute interval which comes in every war, when everything is at stake. He had been hearing about the fighting and he was waiting at his trading station for someone to come and kill him. Nobody did. He had behaved rather decently, for a white man, and the brown men about him rather pitied him while they envied him for having been the subject of Sahnya's fascinations.

And Burton knew just how much of a fool he had been. He could blame himself for men killed and villages burned, for women and children hacked and wounded. . . .

THEN Sahnya came down the nameless, usually stinking, jungle stream in a dugout and smiled at him from the water. Burton stared at her. His face twitched. His coloring had never been high and in the past two weeks it had faded to a pasty sort of gray. No man enjoys having been made a fool of, and when he counts the cost of his folly in blood spilt. . . .

Burton stared. The pasty grayness faded to a tint that was a shade more ghastly still. Sahnya was smiling at him.

She had debated, rather carefully, just how she should persuade him to what she wanted him to do. Burton happened to be the sort of man who will risk his life and honor for a woman in exact proportion to the lack of a reward. So Sahnya knew that a mere amorous appeal would not work. Burton already loved her as much as it was possible for any man to love any woman. He was not to be bought by kisses which, considering the urgency of the situation, Sahnya was abstractedly indifferent about, one way or the other. The question was of how to handle him henceforth.

Smiling, she saw despair deepen in his eyes. Not rage. Nor reproach. Just despair. So Sahnya stepped lightly out of the dugout and came close to him. She told him in her lilting little voice that the revolt had failed and that she wanted him to help her get away. That was near enough to the truth to be convincing. No pretense of regret. No feigning of shame at having lied to him. She merely told him she would be executed if caught, and safe if taken to a certain spot. Terror was no longer an emotion she could feign before Burton. He would suspect its reality. But he had sold his life and his honor for her pretended desire, and knowing that she had lied, he still loved her. He would either do as she wished because he loved her without reason and without hope, or he would not do it.

Sahnya told him, quietly and gravely.

"You will take me, my frien'?" she asked softly.

Burton shook his head. He ground his teeth together and shook his head a second time. He could not speak. His haggard face suggested no immovable resolution. It was merely the face of one who is damned, and who already feels the pangs of hell.

Sahnya threw back her small head proudly. She fumbled at the cloths about her throat.

"You ar-re the only one who would 'elp me, my frien'," she said gently. "Those other-rs——"

Burton groaned, and shook his head again.

She shrugged. And then, without any trace of emotion, she exposed her throat and breast—soft satin, smoothly rounded, rising and falling with her quick breathing, the faintly discernible veins in her throat throbbing with the beating of the pulse beneath.

"If you weel not 'elp me," said Sahnya quietly. "You 'ave a revolver. Kill me!"

She touched a spot on her breast lightly, with the most delicate of fingers. She waited with a curiously pathetic dignity. . . But Sahnya knew that it was unthinkable that any man should kill her. She could see that all the suffering Burton had endured before was as nothing to this moment. Sahnya's pose and Sahnya's expression suggested that she preferred for Burton to kill her than any other man. And also that Sahnya would be utterly subdued if he loved her in spite of her unworthiness, and that thereafter she would be broken to his will by love alone. And, also, it was very clear that the proof of his love would be the thing that would break her will to his.

Sahnya was, as men have said and sung by a thousand campfires, very, very dangerous.

She stamped her foot. Her small and delicate features twisted a little. The traces of tears came into her eyes.

"Kill me!" she cried, with the barest catch of a sob in her voice. "Kill me!"

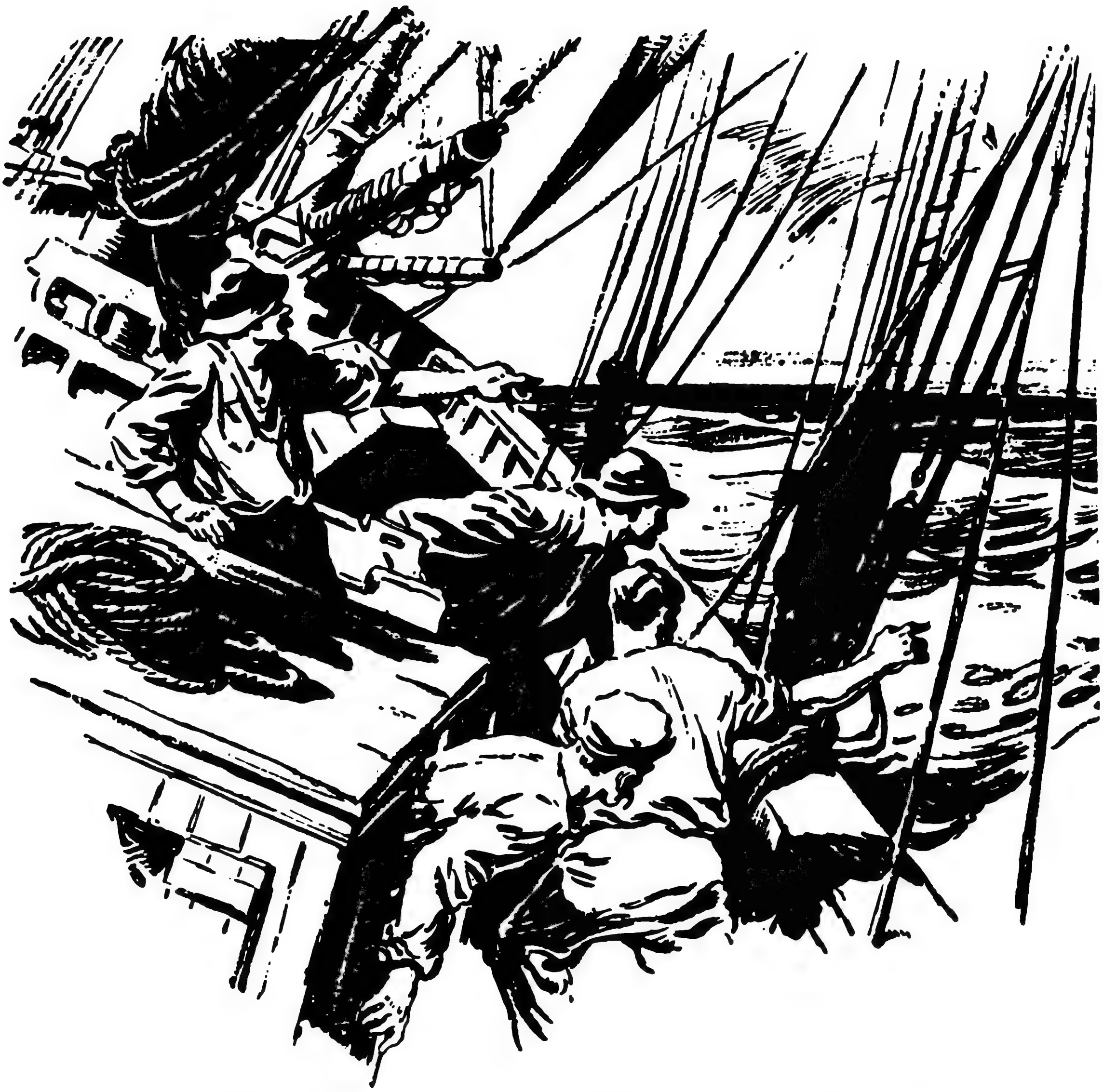
What followed caused the man who later became viceroy to swear resignedly; and it caused the rebellion to drop utterly to pieces and hastened the introduction of civilization and law courts and other matters into Payung; and it caused something approaching bewilderment to be felt in all the white men's clubs in Malaysia; and in course of time it caused Burton's death. Because Burton always did as he was told. And when Sahnya cried:

"Kill me!"

He did.

CAPTAIN DINGLE'S

New Serial of Salt Water



CHAPTER I

AN UNLICKED CUB

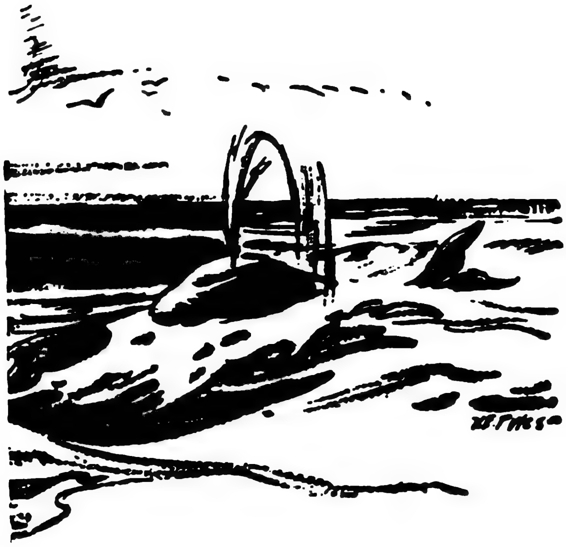
THE wharf fitted the town, and the ship fitted the wharf. Which simply means that all three bore the sign that the golden age of whaling had passed. All along the line of the harbor, on both sides, similar wharves rotted on their green spiles. Similar ancient square riggers rotted at their wharves. In the town the houses huddled together as if trying to hide from the world their shabby paintlessness. A few ship chandlers remained optimistically open; a couple of blacksmiths kept their forges smoldering; and about the wharf end, or in the waterside speakeasies if opulent enough, a few bent or bowed or broken sailormen lingered, hopefully. For the *Cuttyhunk*, last of the deep sea whalers, was fitting out for a last cruise for sperm.

No plum duff voyage this, either. Plum duffers make short cruises, sticking to the North Atlantic, in small schooners and such trivial craft. The *Cuttyhunk* was a real spouter, a Cape Horner. When she came home it would be with full holds, whether one year or two or three were needed for the filling. And she would have seen half the world; the other half being

A Tale of Ships and Doughty Whalermen, of Dangerous Days on Southern Oceans, of a Boy Who Won to the Manhood of the Sea

SEA WORTHY

PART ONE



dry land and no likely place for whales.

There was activity on the wharf. Bundles of barrel staves and thick rounds of iron hoops were going on board. Casks of beef, too, and casks of sailors' bread—hardtack—bundles of spare oars and coils of whaleline.

A couple of spotlessly new spare boats lay alongside, waiting for a hoist aboard. There were long bodies of sails going aloft, dangling from their gantlines like Slim Jims being hanged. Bolts of new canvas and barrels of tar, drums of paint and bags of fuel for the galley stove; a precious little cask of rum, and a precious great chest of slops, watch coats, stockings, seaboots, oilskins and what have you.

And these all disappeared into the belly of the old whaleship like old Captain Jonah disappeared into the guts of that Biblical whale which started the vogue for whaling stories.

At the extreme end of the wharf there was a tumbledown shack which once had housed the homeward bound light kept up by the owners of the *Cuttyhunk*. They owned a fleet of such as she then. Kept a permanent watchman too. Now the shack was nobody's business. While the stores went on board, and the loiterers shuffled nearer, waiting for the moment to be ripe for them to go aboard and seek a chance to go a-whaling again, a hot crap game was boiling into fight in the tumbledown shack.

"You shoot crooked, Yerner!" snarled young Dick Edwards. Dick was a loser. A bad loser. Unlicked, as yet.

"You're a goddam liar!" Yerner came back, and in two seconds the shack boiled over. The two seconds were necessary for the lads to get on to their feet. The rest of the idle lads in the shack were on their feet at the first word of trouble.

And the fight was as brief as the cause. Or the warning. Dick Edwards was a lusty lad of eighteen, strong as a young colt, and as fearless as that colt unbroken. Yerner had seen several more years, and several more crooked gambling fights. He was crooked too. He stuck his skull into Dick's face in the very first minute of fighting, hoping to end it that way. But Dick was stubborn. His stubbornness was his father's despair—and pride too, if it may be whispered—and he declined to let a mere butt in the face stop him. He staggered a bit, recovered, and then jumped on Yerner's right foot, grinding down hard on it. Meanwhile he thumped the Yerner face with two good hands, doubled hard.

And the shack rang with eager cheers. Yerner had taken much money from the lads, too much.

"Give him hell, Dick! Give him hell!"

Dick was conscientiously giving Yerner hell when the doorway was darkened, the huddled crap shooters dispersed, and a square, stocky, angry old man stalked in. He caught Dick by the ear, kicked Yerner in the trousers, and dragged Dick outside with as little apparent effort as might have pulled a cork from an ullaged bottle.

"You damned cub! Brawling again. Dice, too!" With each exclamation the angry old man slapped Dick on the other ear, enthusiastically.

"Aw, dad!" howled Dick, nor dared to squirm while that grip was on his ear. He took, perforce, the slapping, and even Yerner forebore to jubilate. That one kick he had got burned him as if he had taken a seat on an electric gridiron. The gang of idle lads separated. They would gather again, when old Peter Edwards was well out of sight, but that's no matter.

Peter Edwards, late master mariner, had come from paying a farewell visit aboard the *Cuttyhunk*. All the pleasant taste of that visit had vanished. Young Dick would never amount to anything. Gambling, scrapping, idling away his precious time at an age when his father had been third mate of a deep water ship. Worst of all, people were talking about Dick. It was being said, lately, that old Peter Edwards was softening since quitting the sea; that young Dick overran him, defied him, had completely flouted his authority. There seemed to be some justification for that opinion too. The *Cuttyhunk* had been fitting out now for three weeks. Every able man in the little port had earned a bit of money. About the only healthy men who were not making wages on the ship were those who were going to sea in her, and who, sailorlike, saw no point in turning a hand aboard the ship they were engaged for until the ship was well clear of the dock to which she was tied.

Yet there were a few others: Dick and his gang. And, while taking a glowing glass of rum with Captain Turk and grim Ben Barrett, chief mate, sly words had been passed concerning a son of the house of Edwards who could not stomach whale oil. Peter Edwards was still sore over that. He hung onto Dick's ear through sheer humiliation; and Dick's humiliation was as intense as the pain of the twisted ear. Straight up the street to the Edwards house Dick was marched; then straight into the old man's private den.

"You go to work tomorrow," announced Peter, shutting the door upon them and facing the lad. "You'll report to Sims Revel and——"

"I won't work there!" cried Dick. "Me sweep out a dirty little grocer's store? Get me a real job and I'll go to work, but if you think I'm going to be an errand boy you're crazy!"

"At eight tomorrow morning you report to Revel," said Peter. "Either that or you go to sea. You've had your last free lodging, free pocket money, and free clothes from me. There's a chance for you in the *Cuttyhunk*. Suit yourself."

With a final gesture of granite implacability Peter Edwards swung out again, unheeding of Dick's furious retort. For just one instant the old man was about to stop and go after Dick.

"Darned stinking old blubber hunter!" the boy snarled. "Fat chance you'll have of getting me into a gang of reeking riffraff like that. And you can tell Revel to get somebody no better worth."

PETER cared little what Dick thought of a grocer; but he did care, at least, what he said about the fine old profession of sperm whaling and the sturdy men who followed it. That was another sore point in the Edwards home. Peter had dabbled in many kinds of sailorman's art. He had laboriously carved whale ivory into many a beautiful piece of skrimshander; he had with patient art portrayed in paint every ship he had ever sailed in. His masterpiece he had hung in his son's room, a painting of the very *Cuttyhunk* now lying at the wharf. Dick had covered the painting with a print of a brazen hussy in a red bathing suit which would not have made a decent flag for a rowboat. These things rankled. But Peter was more hurt over Dick's apparent worthlessness. He stifled the impulse to go back and start the quarrel over again. He heard Dick slam the door of his room and then the house door slammed.

Five minutes later Peter's ancient automobile puttered and skidded through the yard gates, and sped, with Dick at the helm, around a corner. Peter clapped on his shabby hat again and went out, divided between sorrow and anger. He went back to the wharf, for only in the atmosphere of the ships and the sea would he find ease. And as he turned down by the dock, his own automobile flirted a spray of oily mud upon him and his own son honked defiantly for him to get out of the way. In the car were three of Dick's wildest chums, two bobbed flappers and another idle youth, son of a man who had been a good sailorman in his day, but whose goings and comings upon the sea were now devious rather than aboveboard. Seemed to make a lot of money too.

There was little doubt in the town where the younger set got the liquor they were always supplied with. One of the lads flourished a flask with little regard for witnesses. It was the last straw. Peter Edwards set his foot on the whaleship's gangplank again, and went direct to the cabin.

"Turk, I'm here to ask that favor you always said you'd do if time came," he said harshly.

"Anything in my power, Peter. Is it cash?" Turk smiled. He and Peter were old shipmates. Peter had taught Captain Turk his business.

"Money be damned!" growled Peter, scowling. "I'd like to have Ben Barrett down here for a gam if he ain't too busy. And if you're agreeable, I'd like him and you between ye to take on a job you both told me you'd admire to have, some time ago."

"You don't mean Dick?" Turk stared, with eyes that soon had a twinkle in them. Peter nodded gloomily. Turk put his head up the companionway, and with all the power of lusty lungs yelled:

"Mister Barrett! Oh, Ben!" he bawled. "Git down here soon's you kin! Here's old Peter Edwards come to his senses!"

CHAPTER II

SHANGHAIED

BEN BARRETT was swift in coming, for the inducement was great. But even in the few brief minutes he took in giving over the tallying of deck stores to another and taking the companionway stairs in two jumps, Peter Edwards had seen many things near to his heart; so near that, by the time the three old blubber hunters were together and alone, the smoky, low, odorous cabin of the *Cuttyhunk* was to him simply a panorama.

Captain Turk had placed cigars on the table. Long, black, comfortably pungent cheroots, well seasoned, since he bought them in the Indies two years ago. And rum. Not rum runner's bowel-burning stuff, but good, rich Jamaica, cunningly hidden in the middle of a barrel of sugar. In the smoke of the cheroots, in the warm glow of the old Jamaica, Peter Edwards saw pictures. And the creak of tackles on deck, the sharp click of windlass pawls bringing in the heavier stores, all helped to paint the high lights in his mental pictures.

He saw a long line of Edwards. All whalemen. Never had there been one male member of the respected old line to turn up his nose at honest sperm oil until Dick broke the link. In his smoke wreathing he saw scarred, but capable, old ships bursting their blusterous way across lonely oceans, boats ever swung out ready to lower, manned by lean, keen eyed seamen to whom the world perhaps owed more for discoveries of far lands than to the greater heralded explorers of set down history. He saw rising above the litter that was the wharf, where now the aged *Cuttyhunk* began to sit deep in the water with her burden of four years' stores, the white sails of the tropics, the racing seas under trade wind skies, the woolly clouds of the fine days and the grim gray masses of the evil weather. He saw no grime, no untidiness: for his was the soul of a sailor. He saw no grease, no smoke; no reek could he smell: for his was the heart of a whaleman. And his soul was sore because his son Dick had cast ridicule and revilement upon those things.

Ben Barrett entered, spitting on his hands and grinning hungrily. Captain Turk had been grinning too; but somehow he saw in Peter's haggard face something too grave to grin about. And Ben Barrett's grin was not so vivid two minutes after he came in. There was rather a solemn silence for a moment. Three fresh cigars were lit and three thick clouds of smoke added to the fog.

"Stinking old blubber hunter! That's what this ship is, gentlemen!" Peter started jerkily. "Gang of reeking riffraff. That's you fellows! And my boy, Dick, says so! Gone joyriding, he is, with the bootlegger's precious whelp and a pair o' gals as'll soon fetch up in the Magdalen Home. My car, they took, and with liquor aboard. Look at here!"

Peter showed his greasy mud stains. His cigar was broken by the clench he put on it. He spilled his rum through sheer agitation.

"He won't go to work at Revel's. Says he's too good. Won't ship along with you. I've given you the reasons . . . You said there was a couple of hands needed, Ben?"

"Bring him aboard, Peter!" grinned Ben, happy again.

"That's what I'm here to see you about," Peter returned. "I don't want to bring him aboard. I want him to get the whole works from a bat on the nose to working him up in a spouter. And I don't want to appear in it. There's a man somewhere hid in that young cub, and I want him to wake up to find it out."

The old man paused, and nervously poured a little rum. He swallowed it quickly, avoiding the eyes of Turk and his mate.

"Ain't telling me to shanghai the boy, be you?" Captain Turk asked, frowning down Ben Barrett's wink.

Peter Edwards coughed and blew thick jets of smoke.

"Didn't I say I didn't want to appear? But I'll give Ben a hundred dollars cash when I see Dick in a fo'c's'le bunk, safe to make the voyage. And if you both bring him home to me a man, I'll give you a share apiece out of my holdings in the *Cuttyhunk.*"

There was another pause, in which Peter slily watched his friends. He saw Ben uneasily seek some advice by a look at Turk. He saw Turk getting red, as if not yet certain that Peter Edwards was not suffering from Jamaica fever. Peter went on speaking, in a sort of impersonal fashion:

"The boy told me once it was only because I was his dad he let me twist his lugs and slap his ear. Said he'd be glad of a chance to take out the soreness I gave him on a whaler's chief mate. I believe he did say once that he meant some day to sass Ben Barrett, just to give him a chance to hit him, and he'd show the town all about the toughness of a bucko."

"Tell me where I'll likely find him around dusk, and have that hundred ready!" growled Barrett.

Peter went on as if not hearing:

"He'd get over a busted nose. I did. Black eyes don't stay black, either. And there's many a man ain't a man until a better one hammers the everlasting gimp into him. There he is now, out riding with a parcel o' little wasters, lapping up bad liquor, wrecking my car. Down there at the Point, shouldn't wonder, flinging an ondecent leg at that Black Bottom honky-tonk until nigh midnight. Trouble is, the young cub can handle himself for all his worthless doings. Shouldn't wonder if it took a couple of good men to handle him at that. Mebbe three."

"Huh!" Barrett snorted. "Any time I can't handle any half-baked kid like young Dick . . . Down the P'int, is he?"

"And I'd give most all I've got to see him come home to me bright eyed, and straight, and a man," Peter went on, as if Barrett had not spoken.

Ben caught a nod from Captain Turk, and strode from the cabin, snorting.

"He's going to earn that hundred," grinned Turk.

Peter still spoke on in the same sort of impersonal tone, but loud enough now to follow Ben up the stairs.

"He's half baked, but he's husky. And if 'twas me going to make sure of a hundred good dollars, I'm not so sure I wouldn't take three good men along with me. Thanks for your rum, Turk. Reckon I'll run along home now. Sailing on the night tide, ain't you? I'll be handy. Mebbe I can let go a line for ye."

ABOUT eleven o'clock Ben Barrett and two harpooneers prowled around the dance hall where Dick could be seen noisily leading his party in wild carousal. Ben was unmarried, and he knew sailortown in a score of ports; but the sight of those youngsters, boys and girls, flushed with liquor and capering like habitués of a Continental red light house, wrenched a curse from him and made him spit. He sought for some excuse with which to get the party out. He could think of nothing more original than telephoning a complaint, as from a sober citizen, to the police. The dance hall was often raided; but rarely until complaint was formally made. He took his men back to town. It was not far, and there was but the one road from the Point. Once Dick started home, he must pass a point near the wharves.

Ben Barrett got his call in, and saw two policemen start off in a car. Then Ben called the dance hall, and told the proprietor of the raid. In half an hour or less something ought to happen. He posted his harpooneers, stalwart, lean, steel muscled flingers of death, at a turn in the road with a length of new whaleline. He took himself off to a spot not many yards away, where he could make sure that the rope did not stop the wrong car. Then they waited.

Laughing, nervous, flushed little groups came hurrying by. Now they were outside the hectic atmosphere of the road house, and the liquor was dying, the merriment had to be forced to survive at all. Some walked, some rode piled high in inadequate cars. A motorcycle roared along, two girls hanging to the rear mudguard, swerving from side to side hair-raisingly. Then came Dick's gang.

"Blo-o-ow!" pealed from Ben's throat as if a hundred barrel cachalot had spouted alongside. The harpooneers ran their line out, and the car came to a stop while the girls screamed. Ben was on the running board before the engine stopped, and Dick greeted him with a swift, stinging thump on the nose which turned Ben into a red man.

"Holdup!" yelled Dick's companion, and leaped from the other side, leaving the girls to help themselves. The harpooneers let the rest go, piling in to help Ben. And Ben found himself amazingly in need of help. Suddenly the little dark road was full of fight. Dick put his hands on the sides of the open door, and launched both feet full into the chest of the nearest harpooneer, hurling him into the ditch. And from the superior height of the running board Dick fought like a berserk, fully believing thugs were after him, inclined to believe that Yerner was behind it. He was in error; but not entirely wrong.

Fight as he might, no youth of Dick's immaturity could expect to hold off forever three sea hardened whalemen. Courage he had, in plenty; but so had Ben Barrett and his harpooneers. They stormed the car, forcing Dick back until he was tripped by the gear shift and emergency brake. Even then he rallied and drove them out, snatching up a bottle from the seat and using it with no false purpose. When they fell back, Dick stepped on the starter. The motor clattered. With hasty hands he fumbled for the gear, his foot felt for the clutch. And up from the other side rose Yerner, grinning, swinging a rock in a hastily removed sock. He whacked Dick on the skull with it, and Dick fell over the wheel, unconscious.

"He had it coming from me. Glad to help you, mister," Yerner said to Barrett.

Ben glowered, snuffling through a broken nose.

"I was waiting for a chance to stop him myself when I saw you fellows all ready for him," Yerner added pleasantly.

"Can you drive a car, young feller?" Ben demanded.

"Betcha," grinned Yerner.

"Drive us down to the *Cuttyhunk,* then. Hop in, lads."

Yerner rattled the old car down alongside. He chattered. He was bursting with joy. Here was something unexpected. Young Dick Edwards had called him cheat once too often. Now Dick was being shanghaied off to sea in a stinking old whaler. Yerner's people had been whalers too, but the blood had thinned a couple of generations ago. Yerner helped drag Dick from the car. The harpooneers picked the unconscious lad up and bore him on board. Ben dangled the strung stone that had felled Dick.

"What d'ye say about rewarding this yere young gent, as walloped his chum on the callybash to help us?" Ben called after them.

Jed Roach, who had lost two teeth at Dick's hands, growled over his shoulder:

"I says give him sech a reward as'll keep you in his memory for four years, Ben. Sech a dirty scut!"

Yerner started to clamber from the car again, alarmed. Ben tapped him with the rock and dragged him all the way out. And he hoisted him to his shoulder and trotted up the gangway with him as Peter Edwards arrived, peered as he riffled over a hundred dollars, and handed them to Ben.

"Dunno as I desarve it, Peter, but I sartainly earned it," grunted Ben. "Never would have got him if 'twasn't fer this yere scut hitting Dick with a rock. Oh well, if you insist. There's the car. Mebbe we broke it. I dunno. It rattled us down here all right. Rattled quite a bit. You see Dick?"

"He ain't hurt, unless that rock hurt him. I'm glad you got that Yerner rascal, too. 'Twon't do Dick any harm at all to find him aboard. Shouldn't wonder if it started Dick off in the right fashion, just wanting to be different. Go on, or the boy'll be waking up. Tug's fast to the other side. I'll let go the lines. So long, Ben, and greasy luck!"

In ten minutes the *Cuttyhunk* was swimming placidly seaward. Peter Edwards watched her diminishing shape from the wheel of his car: and a mist was before his eyes, for he had seen his son lying bloody and quiet. But through the mist, red though it was, there loomed to his hopeful vision the figure of a man returning to him, some day, a hundred times his son.

CHAPTER III

ABOARD THE SPOUTER

DICK could have told the world that he felt rotten. He awoke in a narrow box as dark as a black bag and smelling sickeningly of aged oil and rank bilge. His head ached. His mouth tasted as if a family of kittens had just moved out. Above the general, all around ache that bothered his head, was one sharp, sore, tangible to the touch, pulpy bruise, from which a trickle of dried blood had caked down both sides of his face.

He sat up and bumped his throbbing head on another narrow box above him. Groaning, he thrust his legs over the edge of the grimy bunk, and crouched, sitting up half doubled, trying to get his bearings. The place creaked and groaned. It moved. The darkness was different to any he had before experienced. It was not darkness so much as gloom. For when at last he could raise and turn his head, he made out a narrow aperture, crossed with narrow stairs, beyond which was the faint glow of daylight. Somewhere beyond, the glow men's voices sounded queerly. From beyond the glow came eddying air; clean air; salty, tangy air. Sea air.

And while Dick peered around him, finding his eyes could show him things once they adjusted themselves to the gloom, a lustier voice than the rest rang out quite near to the dayglow; a booted step crunched on the narrow ladder. Right overhead a heavy coil of rope was flung to the deck; and a shrill, yelping voice began to howl a halliard chantey. Dick had often heard it, as a little fellow, when his father came home from his seafaring.

"Oh, whisky is the life of man,
Whisky, Johnny!
I drink whisky when I can,
Oh, whisky for me, Johnny!"

"Ugh!" groaned Dick, with the second-hand taste of bad whisky sharp in his mouth. Why couldn't they start any song but that?

"Suffering polecats!" groaned an unseen voice near by, just as heartfelt as Dick's. Then the boots on the ladder clumped on the heaving floor of the gloomy den, a slashing draft of windy brine pervaded the place, and a burly, crouching shape came straight to where Dick sat, as easily as if gloom meant nothing to the shape's eyes. And Ben Barrett's voice filled the low beamed forecastle with chesty sound.

"How many times d'you want calling? Hey, you!" Ben had Dick by the shirt breast and hauled him to the floor. "Show a leg, ye skulkin' half man. Up wi' you. Up, before I rubber-sole yer pants!"

Dick shook his head, slowly recovering his wits. He flamed with fury. Now he knew. There had been something familiar about that nose he had broken when the thugs held his car up. Something familiar about the voice. Ben Barrett! He had told his father once, he remembered, what any modern football tackle could do to a stiff jointed old bucko like Ben. Or any other salty bucko with no more brains than to be a sailor.

"My gosh!" groaned that other unseen voice, miserably.

Dick balanced himself, and made a tottery rush at Ben, fists swinging. And Dick found his first mistake: first of many he was to make before the sea cured him—Ben grabbed him by the flesh under his arms, gripped him until the lad could have screamed; and grinding his own wiry skull hard up beneath Dick's unbristled chin he carried him backwards to the ladder, changed his grip until he got a shoulder in place, and hove up. Dick shot up through the hatch, and landed sprawling among a gang of booted men moving from one rope to another. Even as he sprawled, Dick heard Ben's voice turn upon that unseen companion in misery down below.

"Here, sonny, grab a-holt o' this. That's you. Try an' bust it."

A voice which was also vaguely familiar spoke; a hand as hard as oak bark hauled him to his unsteady feet. Then a wet, hard rope was thrust into his hands while the gang bore him along with them. They stretched out the fore topsail halliards, the chanteyman started another tune, and up from the forecastle hatch shot another delinquent. On his heels stalked Ben Barrett.

"Oh, Ranzo was no sailor,
Ranzo boys, Ranzo!
He shipped aboard a whaler,
Ranzo boys, Ranzo!"

Such rotten songs these men selected! Dick pulled blindly. He knew what he would do as soon as he got his eyes clear and his nerves steady. Just now he felt like obeying. Ben Barrett picked up that second delinquent as the chanteyman started the topsail yard aloft, shook him like a dog, and pitched him bodily among the men at the tail end of the rope.

"Make this scut pull, or I'll work you all up!" said Ben. And man after man thumped the whining unfortunate with shoulder and elbow, treading on his feet, forcing him to pull. Dick felt mildly curious as to who it could be. What other poor devil had gotten into a mess like this? But the dawn was gray as yet. There was a mist. The men before and behind him seemed twice as big and burly as other men. Dick pulled, swearing. If Ranzo had never been born, there would have been no whalers. Or perhaps it was the other way around. Anyhow, he hated Ranzo. Almost as much as he hated Ben Barrett.

"Oh, pity Rueben Ranzo,
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo.
Oh, poor old Rueben Ranzo,
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!"

Things were all wrong. A chill wind blew through Dick's light summer clothes. Everything he touched was wet. Drops dripped from the great dark sails which he could see blackening the misty gray overhead. There was hollow thunder beneath the bows, and sprays shot high to the old ship's plunging and came volleying aft among the crew. But the men wore oilskins, and boots, and tarpaulin hats. Dick shivered in a rig which was only adequate for flinging the light fantastic toe on a dance room floor. All his rebellious spirit surged hot within him. He would have this thing out first as well as last. He'd let his father know. The old man might be hard, might want his boy to be a whaler, but he'd never permit a lot of blubber reeking toughs to kidnap his son and forcibly bear him off from his home. Dick might sweep a store, in a pinch; but he'd do it of his own free will.

"Hey, whar you going?" Ben Barrett had him by the arm, hauling him about as he was striding aft. Dick only gave the mate a swift glance, saw the broken nose. With a swerve and a writhe the lusty, angry lad drove home another stiff punch, and Ben's nose streamed again. But that was all. In a twinkling the tough old whaleman had Dick by the flesh of his breast again, his grizzled head under Dick's chin, and had rushed him to the rail. There he held him with one arm like an oaken beam, and with the other slapped him about the face until his nose bled harder than Ben's own; until his head buzzed.

"Fetch a draw bucket o' water!" snuffled Ben. Jed Roach, the harpooneer who had lost two teeth at Dick's hands, came running with a dripping pail of brine, cold from the sea.

"Souse the cub!" said Ben, and souse the water came, full in Dick's smarting eyes. When he opened them, Ben was on his way to the quarterdeck. Jed stood grinning humorously, with no trace of resentment for his broken mouth. Dick felt sick. The motion of the old whaler was strange. He was sick, besides, from overnight tribulations. But one thing there was which could sting him to further action. The next thing he saw to Jed Roach's not unfriendly face was the unexpected vision of Yerner. Yerner with his back against a mast, laughing at Dick. Dick almost grinned to see his long time enemy in like case with himself. But Jed Roach was saying something.

"Thet's the scut thet give you a sock on the callybash last night, young feller. If 'twasn't fer his rock in a sock, be damned if the mate and two of us could ever ha' mastered you. 'Twas him."

Dick heard it all, but not clearly. When Jed finished, Dick was at Yerner's throat; and even Captain Turk stopped pacing beside the helm to watch, so fierce was the attack. Yerner fought back, as a rat will fight. He kicked Dick in the stomach. That did Dick no good. But righteous anger was superior to agony. Dick backed his foe against the potato locker, and then stuck his knee between Yerner's and punched with every ounce of power he had, until Yerner sank to the deck at his feet. Dick reeled back to the bulwarks and sat down on the spare topmast lashed in the waterways. His head fell into his hands, and he could have cried in sheer misery. He was seasick. Yerner's kick had been a vicious one. Last night's bad whisky and manhandling had not been gentle. No, Dick was feeling not very courageous. He believed he might even postpone marching aft to beard Captain Turk in his royal domain.

But Ben Barrett himself was coming forward with a brimming bucket of sea water, and Dick tried to rise. It was no use. He sank back with a groan, adding to his mental score against the mate one more mark to be wiped off as soon as he was himself and could stand firm on his feet. He closed his eyes, waiting for the slosh of the stinging brine. He heard it slosh, but it missed him. And his peeping eyes saw Yerner staggering to his feet, half strangled, guarding his face with an elbow, whimpering to the mate to let him go, while Ben Barrett was already drawing another bucket. The second mate took charge of Yerner; and Bully Hogg was the man to do a man up properly. Poor Dick. He fully believed that if Yerner were treated like that, his own lot could be no less than hanging by the thumbs. He had heard his father tell of that.

It was a soft, philosophical, dusky voice that really spoke to Dick. There had been a rough sort of humorous friendliness in Jed Roach's voice; but this was actually soothing. He looked up into the coal black face of the Doctor, Pluto, the ship's cook. Pluto had a pan of potatoes, and a peeling knife. He set them down beside Dick.

"Heah, manny, yo' sit there an' shave dem spuds fo' breakfust. Dat will keep yo' stiddy an' busy, too. Keep yo' lip stiff, an' doan' talk back to yo' officers. Call dem 'Sar,' an' run at de word, an' dey leave yo' alone, mos'ly."

"Yes, sir," moaned Dick, picking up a warty potato and wondering how a fellow peeled it.

Pluto laughed, a gurgling, sunny South sort of laugh. He took away the knife as Dick made the first hack at the potato, and started to peel it himself.

"Golly, honey, Ah ain't no genelman. Ah'm jes' de ol' Doctah. Yo' doan' call me 'Sar.' No, sar. Dem officers, an' Cap'n Turk, Ah means . . . Look. Yo' peel spuds lak this. Thin so's yo' doan' waste none. Yo'll be feelin' fine soon's you git some good dry hash in yo' belly . . . Hey! Gib me dem spuds. Yo' run along to de rail, quick. Ma gracious! Dey tole me yo' was ole Cap'n Edwards' boy. Ma belly an' bones, such a sailor!"

But Dick was half soothed by the sight and sound of Yerner, even more sick than he, being driven to plunge his arms to the elbows into a cask of pungent brine, fishing out great fat lumps of odorous salt pork for the steward's harness cask. Yes, surely, the life of a whaler was tough. Whalemen might after all be tougher than he had believed.

CHAPTER IV

REBELLION

THE *Cuttyhunk* was making a passage. Her cruising grounds were in the Pacific, and she was bound around the Horn. But no blubber hunter ever neglected an opportunity to flesh a lance or fill a cask, and while Captain Turk kept his old ship to her work, driving her until she complained in every treenail and butt, he also kept his mastheads manned and his first boat ready to lower.

The first day at sea, when Dick was initiated to the realities of shipboard, in his swift rush to the rail he could still discern the familiar Point, at the mouth of the home harbor. There was a stiff half gale blowing, and the ship sailed fast; but not for two hours did he lose sight of the land he so devoutly yearned for. He had made two attempts to face the skipper. Once sheer stomach stopped him. The other time the mate stopped him.

"See that main royal?" quoted Ben, nodding upwards.

Dick was pale and dizzy. Looking up aloft at the swaying royal yard caused him to feel as if he were riding on a wild horse instead of standing on a wide and more or less solid deck. He had been full of resolution a moment before. Now he was so entirely wretched that he was ready to just let Ben rave at him; to take it and say nothing, but to do nothing either, whatever the penalty. Ben had different ideas.

"Answer me and don't give me dirty looks, my lad!" said Ben, gripping Dick by an arm. "Come along with me. Make a man o' you. That's my job. Up with you! Come on. Climb onto the rail. Grab holt!"

Dick was hanging back. The mate shook him by a leg as he teetered perilously; and Dick was forced to shift his hands higher to avoid being flung into the sea. And how cold, gray and malicious the sea looked! He had known it to look all blue and sunny and laughing down at the Point.

"Up to the royal! Go on, my lad. I'll waste a bit o' time to show you, once."

And so, on up Dick went, right up to where the rigging spread below the maintop, Ben at his heels. And Ben's hand was ever shoving at him; Ben himself crawling up, as Dick timorously braved the overhanging futtock shrouds: for Ben Barrett was not after the lad's life. Yet Dick scrambled, because he feared Ben was. And up the long topmast rigging; out on the topgallant spreader; up the Jacob's-ladder, past the broad, deep topgallant sail booming with wind; and onto the royal yard which seemed to be hung up there for no other reason than to hold him for a moment and cast him down to that queerly narrow, unstable looking little model of a ship out of which the tall masts sprang.

It seemed as if no ship built by mortal man could stand more sail. And the royal mast and yard were so slender. They swayed now. If a sail were loosed on them, that tall fabric of wood, wire and canvas must go reeling over the side. Dick was clinging with both hands to the rigging. His eyes closed. His ears ringing.

"Look, you!" roared Ben Barrett. "Get up here!"

He reached out and Dick had to follow the grip. He found himself sitting on the yard, his arms lovingly embracing the mast. And how the rancid grease that smothered mast and parrel tore at his stomach! But Ben was bawling at him.

"That's you! Sit there and hang on. Keep your eyes lifting. If you see a spout o' steam comin' right out o' the sea, you holler 'Thar she blows!' And p'int whar it is. Two hours, that's yer trick. And look out fer yer hide if somebuddy else sights a spout before you!"

Dick was suddenly alone. The world tottered and fell. When the giddiness passed, he was startled to find himself still seated on the yard. Ben was already on deck, sliding down the royal backstay like a greased streak.

There was little expectation of sighting whales at that moment. The masthead hoops had not been put in place for the lookouts. The ship was still in a raffle of harbor rubbish. Harpooneers were busily coiling whaleline into tubs, honing harpoons, three to a boat, sharpening or straightening the eight-foot lances that probed the whale's vitals when the harpoon had tethered him to the boat. There were water breakers, biscuit kegs, lamps and matches, sails, masts, oars and bailers to be supplied to each of the four boats at the cranes. Until these things were done a whale might swim alongside and flirt salt water over the skipper almost with impunity.

But Dick knew nothing of that. Neither did he know that no skipper at the outset of a long voyage would go to the trouble of lowering in a half gale of wind, no matter what he might do a few days later, when the gear was ready and the home shores not so near to leeward. Even had Dick known that he had been put up there on his dizzy perch simply to give him full taste of what going to sea meant, he would have gritted his teeth and borne it. For, clinging desperately to the fore royal yard was Yerner, far sicker than Dick, far more miserable.

WHEN at last he heard a bell far below him clang eight, and a thin voice carried up to him to come down, he had in a measure conquered his qualmish stomach. He could at least look around without feeling that he was falling. He put out an uncertain hand for the rigging, wondering if he dared to emulate the mate's lightning slide. That was too much. He carefully clambered into the rigging, and descended ratline by ratline.

"Get yer breakfast, boy," barked the mate, and Dick shivered at the mention of food.

The harpooneers would eat at a second table in the cabin, after the skipper and mates had done. Jed Roach hammered away on the anvil, straightening the soft iron shank of his pet harpoon, and watched Dick sidle to the spare topmast again.

"Don't you set thar an' git chilled, sonny," said Jed. "Git you some hash and coffee inside your belly." There was a distinctly kindly note in the harpooneer's voice, and two missing teeth seemed not to harshen it. Dick set his teeth. He wanted no food. Jed walked over, fitting the pole into his harpoon's socket. And Jed talked:

"You got a dirty deal, you did, along o' that feller droppin' you with that thar rock. If 'twasn't fer that, I might have a word to say about these here teeth you punched out o' my head. I ain't goin' t' rub it in fer no sech gutsy youngster as you, though. We was after you, but you'd be ashore wi' your daddy right now if 'twasn't fer that dirty swab jest comin' down from aloft as if the ratlines was red hot."

"You're darned right I'd be ashore!" snapped Dick, on his feet instantly. "And I'm going to tell the skipper so, too. I'll make him land me!"

Jed stopped him on his aftward way.

"Stiddy, my lad. Ain't goin' t' do you no manner o' good, that ain't. No boy ever told the skipper of a ship where to land him yet—and stayed healthy. Go you and eat, even if you don't feel like it. Git grub in you and keep your head up, and you'll be man enough by the end of the voyage to tell all hands what you think of 'em. But not if you starts in givin' slack to the skipper. And if you feel you got to keep right on bustin' Ben Barrett's snoot, why, you need to eat grub more'n ever. Man an' boy I sailed twelve year wi' Ben, and I never see a growed man best him yet. You're but a boy, and you busted Ben's snoot twice already. You might do it again. Prob'ly would. But you'd make Ben peevish. Git you down below and eat, whether you feel like it or not. You'll feel better, even if you have to let it go."

Jed urged Dick to the forecastle ladder, and something in the harpooneer's kindly philosophy impelled the sullen lad to follow his advice.

Magically the food did him good. It was dry hash, made of salt beef and onions and potatoes baked until the moisture was all evaporated. There was little fat remaining, and no grease. Then there was coffee, bitter and thick, sweetened with molasses—longlick, they called it. Being the first morning at sea the Doctor had provided bread. And there was butter. But that beat Dick. It wasn't good butter. He did manage to swallow a dozen mouthfuls of hash, however, and most of a pannikin of coffee, before the rank air of the closed place drove him on deck. And the strong salt air did the rest. Half an hour after he emerged from the hatch, he felt more like the man he believed himself than he had since his car was stopped.

He stayed where he was when the mate appeared. Let the mate come. Let him try some more bucko stuff. Dick felt able now to give him an argument. But Ben remained aft. Other men worked, under the second mate's direction. There was the third mate, too, red faced, fat, perky young Stoll, who had been the dunce of the school when Dick first went there. It was another surprise to Dick. But it had been a day of surprises, from the moment he awoke aboard the spouter.

What chiefly interested him now was that neither the mate nor his two juniors paid the slightest attention to him, sitting idling there when every other man in sight was working. He was to find out later that the crew were divided into watches; that while he was off watch, unless under punishment, he could sleep or idle. But for the present, he got a false impression. He began to persuade himself that a nose broken twice in twenty-four hours had prompted even bucko Ben Barrett to leave him alone. And every minute found him feeling stronger. Once or twice he stood up and stretched, gripping a rope and testing his sore muscles. And he tested his ability to stand steadily, too.

With commendable prudence he resolved to wait until the middle of the morning before seeing the skipper. There was a promise of the sun coming out. The seas were not so bitter looking. The skies held quite a few bright patches. And it grew warmer as the morning advanced. He would wait. He would walk about until the captain appeared. By that time he knew he was able to march aft, announce his identity, and tell Captain Turk a few things about taking people to sea against their express wish.

TURK came out along with the sun. A golden shaft shot across the deck, shining straight in Dick's face, and the warmth of it thrilled him who had perhaps never before given the sun due appreciation. Captain Turk's voice was heard at the same instant. And Dick strode aft, past wondering or grinning seamen, past Perky Stoll, brushing him aside and fetching a scowl from him. Mr. Hogg started across to stop him. Ben Barrett was talking to the skipper prior to going below. Past them all swung young Dick Edwards, and thrusting in between skipper and mate accosted Captain Turk.

"Cap'n Turk, I want to go ashore! I didn't come into your stinking old ship. My stomach won't stand it. I'm Peter Edwards' son, and if you don't know it you ought to. Put me on land and save yourself trouble later on."

Turk held out a hand, restraining two of the mates. He met Dick's furious glance coolly, seeking with side flickers to get some advice from Ben Barrett.

"Hear that, Mister Barrett? Did you hear that? I never heard tell of any Edwards as wasn't a sailor at least, did you? Most of 'em was whalemen, too. Young feller, you must have got sinful drunk last night. Why, your head is all bumped up. Go for'ard, and sleep it off. You're on my articles for a Cape Horn voyage after sperm, and you go ashore—well, let's say this day four year. That'll about cover us, won't it, Mister Barrett?"

"Never mind Barrett! I say you'll put me ashore now!" yelled Dick. Mr. Hogg put a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"You're talking to the captain, my lad. And Mister Barrett's got a handle, too. Get for'ard!"

Dick went mad. He twisted and ducked out of Hogg's grip, and the first face he saw clearly he pushed his fist into. It was Stoll's red face, and the perkiness vanished from it. He saw Captain Turk's amused face behind the mate, and furiously tried to wallop that. A foot tripped him from behind, and he fell headlong into Ben Barrett's legs. To them he clung like a leech, writhed as if getting from under a football pile-up, and brought Ben crashing down. He bounded to his feet, and started again for the skipper. But that was as far as he got. The amusement was gone from Turk's face. He was stern and grim. Hogg and Stoll closed in, sandwiching and pinioning Dick; and the mate got up and completed the job with twitching hands.

"The man's crazy. Bad liquor and evil disposition," said Turk coldly. "Tie him to the lashrail, and let him cool off until noon."

Dick fought, but he was helpless in those iron muscled hands. Dully he knew he was borne kicking to the rail. Vaguely he knew they were tying his wrists. When they let go of his arms he swung, tied with small cord to a rail above the bulwarks, his toes just touching the deck. And with every heave of the ship he swung from his feet, agonizingly suspended by his wrists until the back swing enabled him to gain a second's respite.

He hung there until noon. Before that the sun came out strongly. It burned him. The last half hour of his torment he knew nothing about. He didn't know that even Ben Barrett was watching him narrowly. He only knew at last that a crooning, dusky old voice was murmuring in his ear, that he was lying on deck, and that somebody was smearing deliciously soothing grease over his swollen wrists.

"Dere, honey. Yo'll be fine in a li'l while. 'Tain't healthy, nohow, to try an' bus' de skipper ob a whaleship in de mug. If I wuz you, manny, Ah'd jes' play possum ontil Ah growed as big es dem three mates rolled into one. Yas, suh, yo're mighty good, but yo' got to be better."

CHAPTER V

WHALE!

DICK was no fool. When he found there was no rest for him, for all his bruised wrists, during his watch on deck, he silently made up his mind that the very best way to even up the score was to keep a civil tongue in his head, avoid more bedevilment and bide his time. He knew enough about the sea to be sure that such soft jobs as there might be on a whaler never went to a fellow in disgrace with his officers. He knew, whaler or no whaler, that getting beaten up daily was no way to build himself into condition to tackle those bullydamning mates again. And he was under no hallucination now about getting set ashore.

The *Cuttyhunk* sailed fast. The land might as well be a thousand miles away now. He had heard his father say scores of times that a Cape Horner after sperm might easily cruise for a year and never let go an anchor; scarcely sight land, unless running through straits. Such a ship carried water enough for two years. She might need fuel within that time, but it was conceivable that she would not.

No. He had to make the voyage, unless he died. And Dick had no intention of dying unless by accident. He was put to helping with the boats. And handling the long ash oars, the heavy drogues, the line tubs and water breakers, tortured his throbbing wrists. But, strangely, he found himself interested in the work. At supper-time he could eat, too. When next he came on deck and found that he had all the four hours to himself because he had not drawn a lookout, and was not yet expected to steer, he found much to interest him in listening to Jed Roach's tales of whaling.

So the days began to speed by, until the ship entered flying fish weather. Even Ben Barrett knew when to let up on a man who was trying. Perhaps he found enough for the time being in trimming Yerner into shape; for Yerner was not, and never could be, of man caliber. On the day the ship sighted Barbados, hazy to leeward, Captain Turk remarked:

"Concluded to leave him grow up his own way, Ben? Shouldn't wonder if he turned out a man yet. He's the right breed. Reckon I'll have him in my boat, when we lower."

"With your leave, Cap'n, I'll keep him by me," growled Ben. "He busted my nose twice. That ain't wiped off yet."

"You better let up on that lad," smiled Turk. "You'll never get any change out o' him. He'll likely bust it again, if you try any wipin'."

"Very well. But he'll be the first man in all my goin' fishin' as I couldn't tame. I'll keep him by me, if 'tis all the same to you."

WHILE the ship was on the Barbados ground, sperm whales were to be expected; and the *Cuttyhunk* had to fill her domestic oil tanks at least. Royals yards were sent down, and the masthead hoops sent up, and lookouts swayed at their dizzy posts all through the daylight hours. Dick found a new thrill in working aloft. Now that he was lusty and full fed he developed the agility of a monkey, with the strength and brains of a man—and more than most. He and Yerner were first put to tending lines on deck. Soon Dick was up among the branches with the men; and old Pluto helped Yerner with the menial jobs.

Yerner cared nothing about that, so long as he were not driven to risk his precious neck. Already Yerner had picked out the least seamanlike men in the green crew, and with them he made his companionship. He had tried first of all to get Dick to band with him, claiming that the pair of them, with their gang proclivities, could soon overrun the ship with her simple, greasy whalemen. Dick needed no more than that to impel him to work. For whatever Yerner found desirable had never been desirable to Dick.

They had fought many a murderous fight over the same thing. When Dick came down from aloft wearing a bunch of rope yarns in his belt with the air of wearing honors, Yerner spat a fighting word at him implying that he licked boots. Dick punched him in the mouth, and measured him for a licking, when from aloft came the far-carrying, breathed cry:

"A-ah Blo-ow!"

Dick was separated from Yerner by the rush of the second mate running to leap to the rail.

"Where away?" cried Hogg. The lookout indicated with outflung arm. And in a moment the decks of the spouter seethed. Captain and all mates, harpooneers, cooper, and all hands were there as if by magic. And each boat's crew ranged themselves beside the swung out whaleboat at the cranes.

"Lone bull, headin' to the east'ard!" hailed the lookout.

"Lower away, Mister Barrett! Stand by, Mister Hogg!" the skipper cried, and Dick's intentions regarding Yerner went by the board. He was going out after a whale! But Ben Barrett had not meant to take the green lad into his boat right away. As soon as the boat was afloat, leaping through the seas to the pull of four good oars and a ragged one, Ben for the first time saw Dick.

"Who the hell told you to come?" Ben growled, and half swung the boat with the steering oar. Dick was pulling like fury, teeth clenched, hair flying, the light of battle in his eyes. He grinned at Ben.

"Shut up! I can row as well as a farmer. That's all the others are!" panted Dick, and pulled harder and raggeder.

Ben kept silence. He would see about that later. For the present, the boat was leaping over the long, rolling trade seas towards a rolling, gamboling cachalot—a hundred barreler with a fine contempt for whale ships. While the boat was half a mile distant, with the old *Cuttyhunk* foaming along to a leeward position, the thunder of the whale's broad flukes as he spanked the sea in his play sent a tremor over the ocean.

None of the rowers could see ahead. Jed Roach, harpooneer for the mate's boat, was expected to give rowing stroke with a shout, to row as hard as two men, and, when told, to get on his feet suddenly, turn about, and hurl his harpoon into the monster which he then saw for the first time. And until that moment he could never know whether it was at a quiescent, lazy patriarch of a whale, or a timid, retiring whale, or a fighting old rogue of a bull with a long memory for whaleships' boats, he was to aim. As for the other oarsmen, they only hoped the agonizing first sea pull would soon come to an end. It did, suddenly. Ben Barrett's eyes suddenly flashed, he bent his sweep, swinging the boat.

"Stand up, Jed! Soak it to him!"

Jed was on his feet, half turned, before the words were out; and with the turning motion he lifted his heavy harpoon from the crotch. Dick heard behind him a thud and a swish of line; then before he could see anything in the upflung spray, Jed and the mate were rushing past each other, changing ends in the careering boat, while the oarsmen tried to escape the devil possessed line snaking from the tub. Jed flung turns of the line about the loggerhead aft, and it began to smoke. The boat leaped ahead like a steamer. Men took in their oars and gripped their seats. The form roared past them in a cataract.

"Wet it! Wet that line!" gritted Ben in the thunderous bows. A man dipped water with his tarpaulin hat and soused the tub. Jed twisted more turns about the loggerhead. The sea was at the gunwales—white, yeasty. Somewhere in that smother ahead was eighty tons of crazy whale, stung to the quick by Jed's deep flung steel, possessed of a single idea—to get away from that white sea spider that had stung him.

Straight up windward he traveled. Dick tried to turn to look. It was all he could do to hold onto his seat in the dizzy lurches of the boat. She met the long seas with a crash. Every crash jerked her men from their seats and the gear from its place. Dick gripped the oak and gritted his teeth. He could just see another boat dropping from the *Cuttyhunk's* cranes. Then boat and ship disappeared in the misty distance.

FOR an hour the Nantucket sleigh ride went on. Then the whale abruptly sounded, dived deep, straight down, until the line smoked again, running out to avoid having the boat dragged under. To the last few coils of line the whale went down, and Ben looked around to give the order to cut. Jed Roach shook his head, speechless with the tremendous effort he was putting into holding the last few turns of the whaleline. And the strain told on the whale, three hundred fathoms down. The descending movement stopped. The boat hung there, her bows a scant six inches above the water, the line twanging like a harp string at the stem chocks, quivering like a reed in a rushing brook.

"Haul up! Haul in! Fake it down!" yelled the mate suddenly. And the boat leaped again to the released line, falling back to the sea with a tremendous splash. And the men hauled in the dripping line, hastily coiling it down all along the middle of the boat. The whale was coming up fast. The line said he was coming up right beside the boat. And now the mate seized his lance, that terrible, long steel on a long, light pole, which searches out the heart of the cachalot after the harpoon has fastened the hunter to him.

Dick found the line, a snaky demon, too much for him. He was not used to coiling ropes down like that. It came in by wild spirals and vast loops. It must be coiled clear; for if the whale took it into his head to start off again, that line running out, foul, would take men and limbs and boat itself in one tremendous horror of doom. But the whale broke water right beside the bow oar; and from that moment whaling meant just one thing to Dick Edwards—the whale. The mate braced his knee in the clumsy cleat and thrust deep with his lance. The whale gave a convulsive roll. The sea fast turned red.

"Off, off! Starn all!" yelled Ben, and the oars threshed to back the boat away from the flurry. That was where Dick got in his fine work. While he had been keeping clear of the line, his impatient fingers had been straying along the handle of a spare lance. Now, while Ben drew back his weapon, Dick jerked up the spare, stood up, and drove the steel again into the stricken monster. And the whale, willing to die in peace after that shrewd professional touch of the mate's, put every ounce of his titanic power into a dying protest against amateur work. In an instant the colossal tail, full twenty feet broad, swept up, around, and down, and the boat was scattered in sticks over a furlong of sea.

Men, oars, line, stretchers, bailer and boat were spread like litter. Dick came to the surface bewildered. The blow had been deathly swift. He swam like a fish; but there seemed nowhere to swim to. When he rubbed the salt from his eyes, he made out the vast carcass of the whale, floating like an island, still, harmless, a very refuge. He made for it, and found two men already hanging to the whaleline. He crawled up, gripping the harpoon shaft. From that superior height he saw Ben and Jed, slowly swimming towards him, helping another seaman who appeared to be hurt. And when they were all there, and the injured man with his broken leg was hauled clear of the sea, all hands just glared at Dick and said nothing at all.

Day was all but gone. The ship had been barely made out far to leeward, beating against the trades to find them. And though the hours went, no man spoke to Dick. The injured man moaned as the seas rolled the dead whale about. Men shared tobacco plugs; they talked in low tones through the gathering darkness; but not a word, even of reproach, for Dick. He knew he had done wrong; but it had been impulse, and he could never have known what would happen.

Never mind. They could stay surly. He curled up with an arm around the harpoon and just waited for whatever might turn up. All around the whale the phosphorescence gleamed. Entangled in the line were an oar, the bailer, and the biscuit keg. And streaks shooting past in the dark sea set the phosphorescence into flame. Soon the whale vibrated to the biting tugs of a horde of sharks. And sleep was out of the question. Dick wondered at the nearness of the stars for a while. A shark, leaping half out of the sea to get a jucier bite, flicked water in his face, and Dick's interest in the stars died. He was only interested in the sun. Never a night so long. If the men would only curse him!

But the longest night gives way to dawn. The sun peeped up, and there was the old whaleship, her stained canvas bursting with wind and all golden in the sun, her scarred sides all glossy with the same pigment, her stubby old forefoot agleam with snowy foam, men at every masthead, and a boat almost in the water. She rounded to cleverly, so that the dead whale drifted alongside. And they hoisted up the injured man. Dick was willing to wait his turn. Perhaps after a bit they would forget his fault. Ben knelt up.

"Hook me thet thar bailer, Jed," he said, quietly. Jed fished the boat bailer from the raffle.

"Ketch holt of him!"

Jed and another seized Dick before he realized they were after him.

"Lay him here!"

They laid Dick across Ben's knees, and Ben spat on his hands. They held his legs. Ben's thick arm was across his neck.

Spat! Spat! Spat!

Slowly, with terrible earnestness, the mate spanked Dick with the flat wooden bailer. There on the carcass of the dead whale; the sea alive with sharks; the entire crew of the *Cuttyhunk* looking on. And Yerner.

"I'll drop something on you for this!" gasped Dick.

Spat!

"All of you! Darned stinking greasers! How did I know the whale——"

"*Spat!*"

So on, to the end, until Dick ceased struggling, quit threatening, fell to sobbing in passionate rage. Then they hove him on board. And Yerner, after one look at his face, ducked out of sight and forgot all about the clever things he was going to say.

CHAPTER VI

ROUND THE HORN

"DICK, let's turn to and rush this old blubber boiler!" Yerner spoke in Dick's ear, and surprisingly found no inattentive listener. "You and me, with our guts and brains, ought to be able to work around a lot of greasy yokels like Turk and his gang. What say?"

Dick said nothing, for or against. He went grimly on with his labor. And what labor it was! Down in the blubber room of a whaleship cutting in a whale. In a hot, sickening, unstable cavern, dimly lighted by a flare of cotton dipped in whale oil, the two bold leaders of youthful, hard-case shore gangs sweated amidst steamy blubber and bloody drippings. The whale was being cut in.

Lashed by chains at head and tail to the ship. The mates, over the side, standing on plank stages, armed with razor sharp cutting spades on poles, chopped stolidly away at the ten inch thick blanket of blubber, while the great tackles at the fore and main mastheads, hove upon at the windlass, dragged up the massive blubber hook which was thrust through a hole in the first cut end of blubber. The whole operation resulted in a wide spiral of reeking fat, with bits of flesh adhering, being torn from the slowly revolving monster as the tackles dragged upon it.

When the hook was as high as it could go, a harpooneer darted at the mass at the rail, armed with a murderous boarding knife, which was a sword in any other language, and with a few swift slashes sliced the great blanket piece in two. One piece swung in over the main hatch, the other, with the second hook already hooked in by another harpooneer, went slowly on dragging up another length.

And down in the blubber room, which was simply the square of the main hatch with a floor of hatches laid upon the casks in the hold, was the most stiffling, most sickening, least romantic job of even such a prosaic business as boiling lumps of whale fat for the oil. Those great masses of dripping, steamy fat must be coiled down as they were lowered, to make room for the next piece. And it went on until the whale was cut adrift for the sharks to fight over. Never a let up. Never a moment when the nostrils and the lungs were not offended with the hot reek. And the floor was slippery as oiled eelskin two minutes after the first piece of blubber swung over the hatch. The ship, though leaning steeply to the weight of the dead whale, never remained at that same angle. The long ocean swells gave her a jolly motion which was subtly passed on to the blubber room. The job was given to the least worthy of the crew.

Dick got his assignment because of the surly manner in which he had taken the spanking. Neither his manner nor his punishment were greatly to be marveled at. Yerner got his job on general uselessness. And it was a job to sicken even an enthusiast. Yerner never had been an enthusiast; Dick might have been. Had been or he would never have prodded that whale with the devastating lance. But he was not now. He hauled and slithered, tugged and sweat, because if the blubber were not out of the way when the next piece came down, he and his companion would inevitably be buried under the belching mass; for there was no waiting aboard a whaler cutting in whale.

"I've been talking to some of the gang," Yerner went on, cursing as he slipped headlong into the greasy mass he was tugging at. "There's a half dozen young bucks who never knew what they were up against when they sailed in this bloody lard tub. We saw land yesterday, didn't we? Let's——"

"Shut up and pull fat!" growled Dick. "Want to get us buried alive in this slime? Pull!"

"Hell! You've got no guts!" Yerner retorted.

"You need all you've got," said Dick, and with a jolt of his elbow sent Yerner headlong into the very mess he had just slipped out of.

But the most evil of jobs must come to an end. When the blubber was all stripped, the trypots were prepared, the fire lighted, and the mincers and the boilers went to work while the ship sailed swiftly on her course. The night came down black as velvet, bedizened with tropic stars; and the black smoke swirled to high heaven, the red flare lit the sea blood red. Harpooneers in watches fed the fires with crisp "fritters"—the shriveled residue of bits of blubber from which all the oil had been boiled. Mincers cut the blubber into bible pieces—blocks of thick fat sliced into thin leaves, so that the last drop of oil might be tried out. The barrels were filled, and the cooper hammered down the hoops before they were struck down into the hold. The massive jawbone was set aside, later to have the teeth chopped out, and then to be sawn into slabs for the making of skrimshander.

Then the ship must be cleaned. Rigging swept clean of soot. Sides washed of blood and grease. Decks cleaned and trypots scoured and polished.

IT WAS a week before Dick had time to think. All his leisure went into sleep. And the *Cuttyhunk* swept grandly to the southward, off the grounds now, her domestic oil store replete, her head towards the grim and blusterous Horn. Dick found something strange about the ship since his exploit. He had been insolent to Ben Barrettt; and Ben had duly chastised him in humiliating fashion. There was no reason why all hands should carry a grudge against him. Yet the gang favored by Yerner either ignored him or banded against him; the mate found him a job whenever he caught him idle. The second mate treated him as if he were a bit of blubber; Perky Stoll bullied him whenever the chance offered, and Captain Turk ignored him. Only old Pluto remained his friend: Pluto and Jed Roach.

"You nigh lost six men because you ain't used to obeyin' orders and won't learn," said Jed, gravely. "And you was purty sassy, too. 'Pears to me the mate was easy. You can't expect allus to find men as you kin bust their snoots a couple o' times and 'most drown'd 'em and have 'em bring you posies. I had more teeth once than I got now, too, young feller, and if 'twasn't fer thet thar no 'count Yerner puttin' the domino on you with a rock thet night, dunno as I mightn't have a word or two myself to say arter you 'most drownded me long o' the rest."

"Oh, you give me a pain!" retorted Dick. "I stuck a prod into the whale and killed him. You old mossbacks think there's no advance in whaling methods over what went a hundred years ago. I could show you something about killing whales. I will, too, next time I go in a boat. Watch me!"

"Yo' better watch yo' step, manny," old Pluto put in. "Ah was at sea with yo' fadder when he was a youngish lad hisself, an' Ah never see him git as sassy as yo' gits. Yo' got makin's, oh yes, makin's. But yo' ain't no cappen yit."

"If I stay in this stinking old grease pot three years I'll be captain or dead," Dick answered, and left the only friends he had at that moment in a state of fomenting anger at his foolish youthfulness.

In sheer lonesomeness he tried Yerner, and Yerner at first repelled him. Hadn't he first repelled Yerner? But as the ship drew south, and the breezes cooled, there was more drawing together in the snug, stuffy forecastle, and less of the little cliquerie of the warm tropic nights on deck.

"You had your chance," Yerner said one cool night watch off the River Plate. "If you'd come in then we'd have all been cushy on an island by now. But you stuck your nose way up. Now we're waiting until we get to one of them Pacific Islands. If you want to come in, you can, but none of your snootiness. We all pull equal now."

"Who said I wanted to join any crooked gang?" Dick snapped hotly.

"Don't be too free with your tongue," Yerner sneered. "Seems as if you've always been a bit over the top in your ideas. You gambled, didn't you? And you tried to kid the world you played straight while the rest played crooked. Now you want to join my gang, because nobody else will talk with you, and you . . . Hey, Jud, come over here. Bring Lorry."

Two weasel faced greenhorns of the other watch shambled across the deck.

Yerner was about to give them an earful of Dick's ideas of them, when out of the landward sky came down a pampero, a hell raising squall that hove the ship down until her decks were creamy with foam and her stout spars leaned to thresh her lower yard-arms in the sea.

"Let go all topgallant halliards. Clew 'em up. Down outer jib. In gaff topsail and spanker. Run her off, helmsman, run her off! Jump, curse you, jump!"

Ben Barrett was everywhere. Captain Turk came up on a run, and all hands tumbled up as the ship heeled over. And for an hour it was clew up and furl, stand by and let go; and the old *Cuttyhunk* buzzed through the vicious sea with a white mask of spray about her head.

The skies never cleared afterwards until the ship was inside the Falkands. And then the bitter westerlies of the Horn met her in full career. There was neither time nor mood for resuming the Yerner conference. Dick, in spite of his disgrace, found much to enamor him in the grandeur of the real ocean in its tempestuous moods. He learned to steer when sent to stand lee wheel in a gale. He soon got to know what sail combinations went with the different wind strengths. In spite of himself he felt the thrill of the sea creep into his blood. When the gray old Horn came in sight, he was all primed to give it battle. And like the hoary old traitor it ever was, Cape Stiff let the *Cuttyhunk* roll around with her royals set, and never blew upon her one bitter blast from his stormy store.

Dick was disappointed. But when Yerner approached him, while the ship stretched out on her free course to the sunny South Sea Isles, intimating that now was the time to resume their chat, Dick was too much interested in his work to bother. He had won a hearty word from Ben Barrett, even Hogg grudgingly told him his work was good. Old Pluto one evening stole into his hand a slab of plum duff heavy and solid enough to fill a schoolboy or an embryo whaleman. And Jed Roach was teaching him many things. With a leadline, dropped down ventilators, Dick got varying depths, and Jed taught him how to read them off. Every rope in the ship had its name and use. Jed showed him that, too. And, treasure of treasures, Jed had an old sextant and a book of tables. Jed once cherished ambitions; but figures scared him. He had never mastered the simple art of navigation, though he was a first rate seaman.

"You take it, book and all," Jed insisted, offering the instrument and the book. "You're smart. You got the head. I ain't likely ever to want either of 'em. And if you stick to whalin', Dick, and ever git to be master, why, I'll take it kindly if you'll keep a boatsteer's berth allus open fer me. You watch the skipper next time he takes a sight. You'll catch on. Mebbe you'll git a jump 'fore you knows it. Hogg ain't no navigator, nor ain't Stoll. Ain't neither of 'em sense enough. And I ain't so sure about Ben Barrett, neither. You hook onto the gadget, and l'arn."

Dick hooked on and learned.

ONE evening, when the air was soft and the seas had turned from greenish-gray to blue, Dick sat with his back to the brick tryworks, reading the old "Bowditch Navigator" Jed gave him. The sextant lay beside him. He had little time while the sun was up to get sights, and if he could get them at all he had no access to a chronometer. So he set himself to master the latitude problem by meridian altitude—sun, moon, or stars—so that he might know that thoroughly at least. His reading so far had taught him that the earth might safely be circumnavigated by a seaman knowing only how to get his latitude. He was waiting for a star, due to transit just after dark. And his eyes stuck to the print until the daylight had gone. Then he sat gazing up at the particular star he was waiting for. He felt the fascination of it. The sky ablaze with stars that kept popping into sight as the sky grew darker; the soft soughing of the seas around the bluff old ship; the crooning of the balmy air in the broad sails.

"How you making out?"

Yerner crept around the tryworks and sat beside Dick. He spoke in a side mouthed half whisper.

"Navigation, ain't it?"

Dick nodded curtly. He was watching his star. In ten minutes he could begin to bring it to the horizon. Yerner called softly, and four greenhorns came out of the foresail shadows and sat beside him and Dick.

"Dick's learnin' navigation. Gettin' it, too," Yerner said. The rest of his gang, as he called them already, leaned closer, and Yerner rapidly outlined to Dick a rascally scheme for waiting until boats were away after whales, then running away with the ship to some fanciful isle of brown maidens and breadfruit and palm wine. Dick said nothing. He watched his star, listening to the droning of Yerner, only waiting for the end to answer definitely. Darkness was complete now; and in the lee of the tryworks the shadow was a black patch.

The rest of the gang broke in with scarcely discreet speech, and Yerner grew less careful as he grew more earnest. Dick was halfway to his feet, carefully raising book and sextant to the tryworks out of the way, when a bulky shape loomed up from around the works, bringing all the gang to their feet. Somebody rushed across Dick's vision, somebody struck out, and Dick struck more swiftly in sheer self-defense. His fist crunched on flesh. The man he struck stopped short in his tracks for two seconds, and Yerner and his gang vanished like rats.

"Consarn you, you've busted my nose ag'in!" snuffled Ben Barrett and rushed Dick against the tryworks. Dick had no more intention of punching Ben than he had of flying to Mars. He had been taken by surprise. So he temporized by trying to apologize; and Ben gathered him in meanwhile. Throwing a turn of a rope about Dick's arms, the mate blew the blood from his streaming nose, then blew his whistle for the watch.

"Take this yere young pirate and lock him up in the spud locker while I go call the captain," he said. "He's been talkin' mutiny!"

CHAPTER VII

THE POTATO LOCKER

DICK gripped the stout wooden slats of the potato locker, which was only a house built under the after boat skids, of open slatwork on all sides for ventilation. It was dawn, and he had stood there all night waiting for Captain Turk to appear.

"Do him good to let him stay there a while," Turk had said when the mate went to tell him. Turk was not quite ready to believe the worst of Dick. He wanted time to think. And whether Dick were innocent or guilty a night in durance on a fine night would hurt him but little. At four o'clock, when the east was graying, the skipper was up anyway, for the ship was on whaling ground, and he stood before the locker regarding Dick. Dick glared back.

"You're a fine credit to a decent father," Turk remarked. "Conniving mutiny in the dark behind a black shadow." He got no further. Dick was raving.

"It's a lie! A darned rotten lie! I never spoke one word of mutiny as you call it! I'm not that kind of a dog——"

"Why did you rise up an' bust me in th' nose when I caught you at it?" snuffled Ben Barrett, glaring over a nose swollen to potato size.

"How did I know who it was?" yelled Dick. "You sneaked in on me as I was getting up to hammer—" Suddenly he stopped.

"Yes? Who was you goin' to hammer?"

"Go to hell! I won't tell you a thing. Find it out for yourself," was Dick's sullen rejoinder, and he flung himself down on a sack of potatoes and refused to say another word. He stayed there all that day, and all the next. The mate was bitter against him. For all Ben's riding him when occasion demanded, Ben had always nursed a sneaking pride in the youth—a pride which insisted that one day at the end of a whaling voyage, which might be one year or four, he was going to take back to old Peter Edwards a man size son. And to Ben's eternal credit it can be said that the reward had little to do with the matter.

If anything kept him after Dick it was his thrice broken nose. Even that was a personal matter. It could be wiped out utterly in one good stand up knock down scrap. But that Dick stooped to plot mutiny with disgruntled members of the crew, and refused to reveal them—that bit deeply into Ben Barrett. And nothing Captain Turk could say altered him one bit. Captain Turk did not believe that any son of Peter Edwards could be crooked, but evidence had to be weighed. Turk believed that young Dick might be a hell raiser, and a hot handful for a father to bring up; but he would not believe that any youngster slugged and dragged aboard an old blubber hunter, who could so soon turn from sullen resentment to keen searching after sea knowledge as Dick had, could be bad enough to merit Ben's verdict. Yet Dick refused to give the names of the men he was with behind the tryworks. Dick must pay the penalty.

And as the day brightened, and the decks were always peopled, Dick paid. The sun was warm, the breeze slight. He had air, but no room. And, when Captain Turk brought out his sextant for the noon observation, Dick, his new found navigational lore in mind, mentally went through the calculation of the latitude, for Turk was a simple soul, and in reading off his sextant arc spoke the degrees and minutes aloud. Then Dick, trying to recall the sun's declination for that day, had to think of the date. His birthday! His birthday! The thought drove all else from his head. Stretching to his full six feet of brawny height, Dick Edwards, no longer a youth but a full man in all else but experience, swore a man sized oath, seized a sack of potatoes, and hurled it at the slatwork. Then he flung himself down on the sack where it fell, and buried his head in his hands, tearing away at his thick, curly hair.

"The lad's ill, Mister Barrett. You'd better let him out," said the skipper.

"It's temper! Let him sweat it out!" growled Ben, and had his way.

PERKY STOLL stopped often to grin through the slats. Yerner, and his precious gang, hurried past the locker whenever they had to pass it. Yerner glanced sideways at Dick on that first day, as if to find out what he thought; he did not so much as pause on the second day. Dick changed in two days from a youngster sowing wild oats to a man nursing a bitter grievance. And when at last they let him out, he spoke to nobody.

Whaling was poor. It was the season for sperm, but the *Cuttyhunk* sailed day after day, week after week, never raising a feathery spout. Turk had made the long passage around the Horn on a hunch bolstered by one previous experience; and the hunch flopped. The crew from harpooneers and mates to the last green hand worked on shares. No oil, no pay. And, six months out, the *Cuttyhunk* had the oil of one sperm whale in cask. Yerner's gang had a couple of recruits on the day that the ship sailed through a group of jewel-like islets without anchoring. Dick let Yerner talk, without committing himself; though, without further doubt, Dick was ready to throw his main along with even Yerner. Anything rather than carry on trying to make good with the name of mutineer on him.

"Have the name, have the game," he muttered to himself, watching the islets melt into the afterglow of the sunset.

Yerner had felt his feet grow cold while passing through those islets. He had decided to take a boat, if he could not take the ship, and run. But somehow the job loomed bigger than he had thought. He let the chance go. He would talk to Dick again.

And there was Stoll. Stoll was pretty much of a dunce as a whaleman as he had been as a scholar. His father owned shares in the ship. And Stoll was the man to take advantage of it. Old Stoll owned as many shares as Captain Turk, so the third mate reckoned himself, by his father's proxy, as good a man as his skipper. He was not, by a long whaleline. But he required to have that demonstrated to him. Demonstration came just after losing the islands. Whales were sighted. From the mastheads shrilled the cry:

"She blows! She *blo-o-ows!*" and the ship woke to vivid life.

Five whales. Three boats. Barrett, Hogg, and Stoll in command. And Dick, bursting anew with ardor, forced to stay on board along with old Pluto, keeping ship with old Chips, the carpenter, old Mallet, the cooper, old Sparks, the blacksmith, and two green hands. Turk looked on at the chase, too intent to notice mere individuals.

Hogg got fast to a lumbering old cow whale with a calf at her fin. Stoll, holding his course after a fat bull, ran across Hogg's line, smashed his bows, and forced him to cut line. Hogg was picked up, with his crew, by the slowly cruising ship, sweating curses, spitting brine. Stoll went on his devastating way in tow of his bull whale. Ben Barrett had singled out a lordly old whale carrying the stubs of three lances and harpoons in his black bulk. That was a vat of ninety barrels of oil at least.

Ben got his whale. Stoll sailed gaily down at the tail of his newly fast fat bull, and struck the mate's boat squarely amidships, spilling all hands out of the two boats. And Stoll's bull, resentful at being so ingloriously released, perhaps, where glorious death awaited him, simply lay on the sea and swept his broad flucks to and fro, and turned the wreckage of two boats and gear and men into splinters.

THERE were two men with maimed limbs to be greeted by the man whose leg had been broken in Dick's boat at the first whale. That man's leg was mended. But the memory persisted. Captain Turk remembered, too. And his ship was newly upon a fat ground, where whales frolicked. But his crew showed little promise of making a full ship. Turk called Stoll before him, and before the whole crew,

"A fatheaded son of a blubber fed father! You lose me two whales and two boats in two minutes! If your father owned the damblasted ship entire I'd not keep you aft. Get you to the forecastle and shift your gear there. Mister Barrett, can you pick me a man for'ard who's fit to come aft?"

"There's Dick Edwards, as you thinks so almighty of," replied Ben with a wet grin. Turk ignored the hint. He beckoned Jed Roach.

"Get your gear aft, Jed. You have as much sense as Stoll, anyway, and you won't lose me a boat every time you git fast to a fish."

So Jed went aft, but was not at ease. He wanted the companions of the petty officers' quarters, the throbbing thrill of the harpooneer's oar in chase, the hot moment of ecstacy when the harpoon flew from his hands and sogged into the flesh of the whale.

"I'm going to ask the skipper to let Dick come aft," Jed told the mate one night as they paced the deck before the change of watches. "That thar lad knows 'most as much as the skipper a'ready."

"The dumblasted mutineer!" growled Ben, and Dick heard, from his self-appointed snuggery atop of the boat skids.

When Dick went forward he found Stoll in close confab with Yerner and the jackals. Dick so came to regard the men who had swung in with Yerner. At that moment Dick would have herded with real jackals, so moody was he.

"Stoll's with us," Yerner said, out of the corner of his mouth as Dick appeared. "He knows the Islands. There's girls, and no work, and pearls to fish for, and grab your grub from a tree. Better come in, Edwards. We'll all be shipkeepers now—unless Turk has to lower. First time three boats are away. . . What say? Ship's ours, ain't it?"

"For all of me, she is," growled Dick, and turned into his gloomy bunk, leaving grinning teeth and leering eyes at his back.

"He'll stick. I know him," whispered Yerner. "And he's a handful in a fight, too. We need him. Maybe we'll want to sail to some other island. Why not pick and choose, with a ship and the wide Pacific to play in?"

In the morning Dick sought out Yerner.

"Count me in," he growled. "I'm through trying to please these greasy masters. Only don't be funny, Yerner. I don't like you, or Stoll, or any of you overmuch. I just like the others less, that's all. First time three boats are away . . . ."

It was many a day before three boats went away at once. Week after week the *Cuttyhunk* cruised without raising a single spout. The officers put it down to Stoll's jinx. The crew were weary with hanging at the masthead, straining eyes for that single jet of vapor. Through favor of Jed Roach, Dick learned the ship's distance by chart to the nearest islands, and he carried the news forward when relieved from the helm.

"Tomorrow night, then, whales or not!" said Yerner. And Stoll licked his thick lips.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ISLANDER

NEITHER whales nor lack of them halted the little scheme of Yerner. It was a plain old fashioned gale of wind that struck down out of a blue sky just north of Capricorn and drove the old whaleship foaming before it. She was sliding along under topgallant sails, with her mainsail hanging loose in the gear, patiently seeking the feathery spout of sperm. The moon and stars suddenly slipped out of sight behind a haze. The sea to windward grew dark. Full abeam it caught her, and, light as she was with her empty holds, the gust hove her down.

"Leggo t'gallant s'ls!" bawled Mr. Hogg, suddenly awakened from a nap by being hurled against the skylight. The sea was in the lee waterways, and the scud rushed across the sky swiftly.

"Take in flyin' jib! Gaff tops'l! Brail in the spanker! Get a move on! Hell! Rouse out all hands, one of you!"

The ship was lying down until her main yard dipped the lee arm into the sea. The skipper came up, awakened by the sudden heeling over and the uproar.

Gear was flung down from the pins; halliards let go; and downhauls manned. Braces rounded in to spill the gusts from the swollen canvas.

"Furl the t'gallant sails and take in fore and mizzen upper tops'ls!" ordered the skipper, and sent all the mates along to help. And the skipper took the helm himself. For Captain Turk had seen sudden gales like this before in the Pacific, and respected them.

In an hour the *Cuttyhunk* roared through the big seas, dead before the gale, under three lower topsails, reefed foresail, reefed upper main topsail, and foretopmast staysail. It was all she could stagger under; yet Turk dared not take in more sail, for the following seas leaped at her heavy flanks and could board her if she sailed less swiftly. Two men were needed at the wheel. The seas at her bluff bows thundered and foamed white above the catheads.

Two days she ran. In the first watch, after she was snugged down for running, the log was hove. She ran out more line than she had ever done before; and when that part came which had not been used before, it snapped off short, rotten with months of damp and tight rolling. The carpenter began to make a new log chip at his wind stripped bench abaft the tryworks, and on the reeling deck he slipped, cutting his hand with a chisel. The log was not completed that day. The sun was hidden for two days, and when the gale blew out, as suddenly as it had come, there was a sticky haze over the sea, no wind at all, and neither sun, moon nor star. Lookouts were aloft again, not so much to seek whales as to watch for land. There were islands and islets and atolls and just plain murderous reefs, all within the probable vision of a lookout aloft, if the ship had run as far as her broken logline would indicate.

"There's somethin' dark to loo'ard," hailed the lookout at the main. Captain Turk himself went aloft with the long telescope. It was twilight, and the haze seemed to be thinning. All he could see was a black rain squall, marching swiftly down the horizon. He swept the horizon with the glass. Squalls, in plenty; the aftermath of the departed gale. Nothing to fear; yet no land either. Good the breeze had gone. Soon there would come a mild air, giving the ship steerage way. Meanwhile, she was well where she was, until some observation could be got or some sight of land be had.

"Keep your eyes skinned, that's all," he told the three lookouts as he tucked his telescope under his arm and slid down a backstay.

A star peeped out. Turk looked at it a bit wistfully. He had not learned star sights. Pole star, yes; that was a simple method for latitude. But a star for longitude . . . He had heard of steamer captains navigating almost entirely by stars and was not going to say it couldn't be done, but . . . .

"Thet thar young Dick is right smart with a sextant, Cap'n," Jed Roach ventured.

"Go fetch him," said Turk, heedless of Dick's standing in the ship, only eager to know his position. Jed shambled forward. This would be a fine chance to start Dick on the right track for a berth aft. Jed himself was uncomfortable in the cabin. He found Dick, crouching against the windlass in the middle of his precious cronies.

"Come on, Dick. Cap'n ain't easy about his position. I told him you could take a star sight."

"Go tell him to wreck his old ship," growled Dick. "The hell do I care where she is!"

"Go on," Yerner urged excitedly. "Yuh damn fool, don't we want to know where we are at? Go on!"

The other rascals hustled Dick to his feet, muttering in his ear.

"'Twon't do ye no harm, Dick," said decent old Jed Roach. "There'll be a berth aft jest as soon as you're ready for it. I spoke to the Old Man— Thet's you!"

Dick was slouching aft. He stopped at the forecastle hatch, ducked below for his sextant, and then went with Jed.

DICK was permitted to look at the chronometer. He had never seen it before. And he had brought along his watch, so that, under pretext of needing it on deck for the sight, he had at last got Greenwich time and could depend upon it for a few days at least, if chance came to take sights for himself.

The star had disappeared when Dick got aft. Captain Turk grinned a bit to see Dick peer aloft. It was something of a moment for Dick and he felt cocky.

When at length the skies cleared for a brief spell, two stars were visible, and Dick took the one that had not before been seen.

He hurriedly glanced at his watch, in the light of the lamp Jed held for him, and then a hot thrill surged through him at the fear that he might make a fumble of the calculation. Turk stood in the chartroom doorway, regarding him with something like amusement. Dick took twenty minutes to work the sum and then showed it to Turk.

"This puts us 'way to loo'ard of them islands. Can't be right. How did we run through 'em and not see or hit 'em?" the skipper grumbled.

"That's up to you," Dick retorted impudently. "You asked me to take a sight and that's the answer."

Dick marched forward. Yerner and his gang followed him to the forecastle.

"Where are we?" they wanted to know. Dick told them. Yerner glowered at him.

"You fooling us?"

"Oh, go to the devil! You calling me a liar?" snapped Dick.

"We heard what Roach said about you gettin' a berth aft," one of the others insinuated.

Dick carefully replaced the sextant in its case and went on deck without replying. But they followed him up. They crowded around him. And the skies cleared suddenly. Down from the foremast head came the quick hail:

"Small boat, canoe or somethin', right under the leebow!"

In a moment every man of the watch was at the rail. The skipper and Jed Roach sprang to the side. A man forward hove a line from the fore pinrail, and it tightened. And up the side, nimble as a cat, breathless, and laughing, too, clambered a slim shape slenderly clad in a queer, romper sort of garment that revealed in the starlight a boyish figure with bare brown legs and arms. A musical, unafraid voice said:

"I got lost!"

Heads to the rail again. The canoe, broken against the side, floated astern.

"Lucky you hit us, boy. Where ye from? Get carried off in the gale?"

"I'm a girl. I'm June, the trader's niece. I got lost in the storm, of course."

"June who? Where d'ye come from?" Turk persisted. He caught the girl by the shoulder, turning her around so that he could see her face. She was entirely composed. She seemed no older than sixteen, and of the white race, for all her bronze hue.

"What's yer uncle's name, lass? What island d'you come from?" Turk insisted on knowing.

She laughed again, a bit breathlessly.

"My uncle is Onslow the trader. I don't know what the island is called in English. The natives call it Fulai."

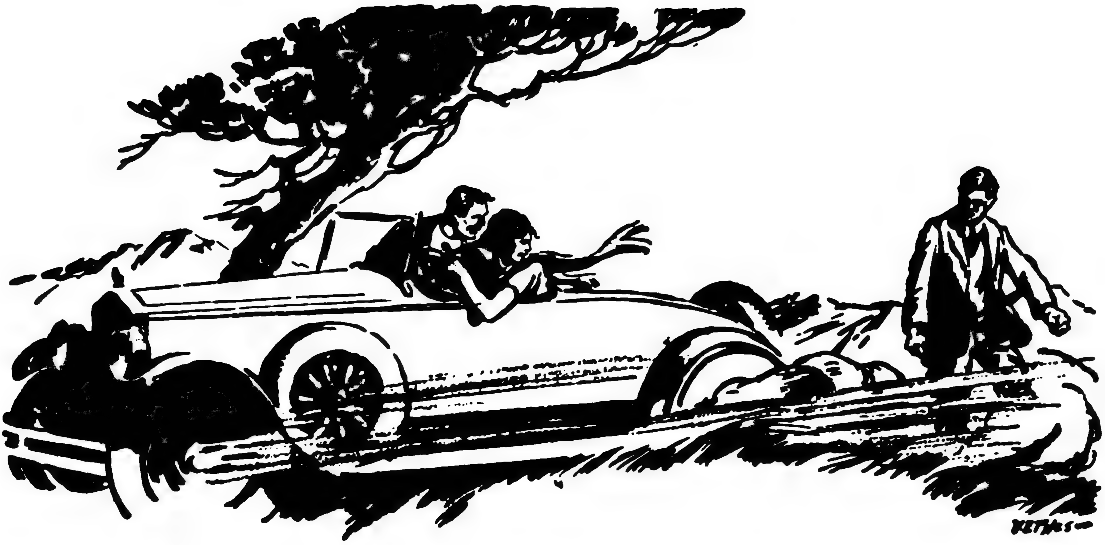
"Come and show me!" Turk led her aft. Her boat was gone. There was no island in sight. None anywhere except away up to windward. A whaleship on a four years' cruise after sperm was no place for a growing girl of sixteen. As he gently shoved her along before him, all the crew pressed forward to have a nearer look at her. There were nudges, and grins, and hoarse comments; but it was Yerner whose eyes were keenest.

"Jumpin' cats! Look at that pearl on her neck!"

The crew looked and marveled. And straightway the seed of added strife was sown on fertile ground. For the black pearl on the throat of the maid was lustrous and large and, to simple men, beyond price.

Treasure! In the chapters to follow, the lust for sudden riches sweeps over the crew of the stately Cuttyhunk *and on her decks is raised the red hand of mutiny.*

Here Is a Yarn of Youth and High Romance and Gayest Humor



LEFT FOOT FIRST

By ELWOOD F. PIERCE

THE city editor calls me over, "Hey, you!" and says: "Let's see if there's anything to you and if you'll ever make a reporter, political influence to the contrary notwithstanding." I pick my teeth and look at him with an all-right-I'll-bite expression and he shoots: "We've just been handed a blind tip that Old Man Hogan's daughter, Marie, has eloped with a wop saxophone player. Go and get it."

I blink into the cold blue eyes of the city editor and hate him, knowing there is no love lost between us. He looks as if he's just returned from the races and all his nags lost. I think he suffers from malaria of the soul, for he's a strange type of newspaper man. He does not smoke, chew, swear, drink or fancy the ladies. The assistant city editor, who has brown eyes and a long nose, is not much good either. Also the assistant is as nut as a fruitcake.

"Go and get it!" snaps said city editor and I walk away knowing that I am about to make a fool of myself and that I'll have a perfectly beautiful time keeping people from finding it out.

Everybody in town knows Old Man Hogan—J. Waterson Hogan, head of the traction system. To everybody he is Old Man Hogan. He has been a friend of my father and I have often heard the old gent speak of him, not always in endearing terms. The trouble is, Hogan has succeeded and my father hasn't. Hogan has a business heart like a strike at a marble quarry in Russia, but is supposed to be good-natured at home. When you get him away from the eyes of the world he will even let children look at the comic sheet first.

Also Hogan has a son and daughter; I know that. The son is in the university here in Los Angeles and would make an excellent runner except that he has a habit of remaining too long in one place. And now daughter has mixed up the scenario by hotfooting it off with an Italian gentleman addicted to the saxophone evil. After the city editor gives me his line I suppose it's up to me to visit the Hogan mansion and see if there's something I can do about it, although I'm not what you might call enthusiastic.

I ring the bell and a gent in uniform comes to the door. I ask if Mr. Hogan is in. No, Mr. Hogan is not in. Very stiffly, you must realize.

"Thank you," I say. "Have you any idea where I can find him?"

The gentleman in the uniform wiggles his ears sedately and assures me that Mr. Hogan's whereabouts, so far as he is concerned, form one of the world's great mysteries. Again, "Thank you."

Back somewhere in the house a girl's voice calls:

"Who is it, James?"

James turns with a frown.

"A gentleman to see Mr. Hogan."

I'm sort of dazed because she has a lovely voice and I can sense that she is walking toward the door out of the depths of the house. I feel as useless on earth as a flying machine. In a moment the girl has stepped in front of James and is saying, "How do you do." Just like that she says it, "How do you do." James disappears.

"Nice evening," I venture, wishing I was away from there. I'm sizing her up—a good kid, no doubt. But you can bet she'd never say: "Oh, don't call a taxi, dearie; a walk of two or three miles will not hurt either of us." And she is right up to the minute; there is nothing of last year's model about her, let me say.

"What can I do for you?" she asks, smiling. I am willing to bet she can read my mind.

"I'm a reporter from the *Golden State Gazette,*" I say crudely. "I've been sent to find out if it's true that you've eloped."

"Well, of all the nerve," she smiles again. "How do you suppose that got out?"

"I haven't any idea," I explain. "Then it's true, is it? You might tell me all the horrible details."

She looks me up and down and I am curious to know the result of her inspection and the impression I am making.

"What's your name?" she wants to know.

"Jimmy O'Malley."

"That's a good honest name," she opines, and then gets serious. "Too blamed honest for a newspaper reporter to carry around with him, especially one for the *Gazette*. You ought to pick one that fits the job better. You don't happen to be related to Tisha O'Malley, do you?"

"Not exactly," I explain. "She is nothing more to me than my sister."

"You come in here and make yourself at home," orders Marie Hogan, standing aside to let me pass. "Why didn't you say so in the first place? Tisha is a friend of mine. Why only a week ago I borrowed five dollars from her to pay the taxi driver."

"One must go away from home to learn about one's family," I say. "Tisha loaning you money is like the Pope asking a parish priest to let him have a bed for the night."

"Sit down," Marie directs. "Now what's this elopement yarn you ring our doorbell for and peddle like a book agent?"

"I come because the city editor told me to," I explain lamely, and decide I might as well make a full breast of it. "The city editor don't like me because I got my job on the paper through Uncle Danny's political pull. Uncle Danny Morrison, you know. Uncle Danny is a friend of the business manager of the *Gazette* and I guess city editors don't like business managers to come butting in. Well, said city editor told me he had a tip you'd eloped with a wop saxophone player and he ordered me up here on a friendly little visit to see if there is any truth in it. Is there?"

"All I can say is that the city editor must have been making a fool of you."

"I was afraid of that," I agreed. "But it wasn't necessary. I was a fool long before I came in contact with him. Then there is *no* saxophone player?"

"Oh, I suppose there is a saxophone player—somewhere. A number of them, in fact. Every jazz orchestra must have a few, you understand. But up to the present writing I am not in love with any, thank you. What did you say the gentleman's nationality was supposed to be?"

"Wop."

"Oh, what a compliment. I know some lovely wops, as you call them, and very charming people they are except for the spaghetti side of their nature. I may be able to eat cabbage and other quaint Irish dishes, but I'm spaghetti shy." Then suddenly: "Can you keep a secret?"

"I can keep anything but money, and I can't keep that because I don't get hold of any. I'm not like my sister—able to loan five-dollar bills to a certain rich Miss Hogan. Only don't tell me anything that you are likely to be sorry for."

SHE is thoughtful for a minute. She is very dainty; a delightful girl I take her to be, trim and fancy, and as I sit watching her I cannot help thinking what excellent pals we might be if only the opportunity presented itself. But here she is, lace curtain Irish, and that does not leave me a chance. I can look at her and tell that she is not the kind of a girl who would lick her fingers at a picnic lunch.

"I suppose," she says, with her lower lip falling just a mite, "that if Old Man Hogan's daughter eloped with an Italian saxophone player it would be considered news. My picture would be paraded across the first page and the reporters would write all the details they could learn and some they couldn't find out. That's true, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," I agree with a shrug. "Now see here, Miss Hogan, I want you to get me right on this business——"

"But what would happen if I married some respectable, hardworking, fine Irish lad?"

"I—I— Well, I don't——"

"Oh, yes, you do know. There would be a write-up on the society page, with a list of bridesmaids and a description of our gowns, and a picture of me in my wedding dress. Just casually interesting. But should I run away with a wop saxophone player my name would be sprawled all over the front pages. That's the way it would be, and you know it."

"You see," I try to make her understand, "I'm green at this business. Why, I'm only in my first week at the *Gazette* and I have a lot to learn."

"That, I suppose, is why the city editor sent you up here. He wanted to annoy father, and hoped Old Man Hogan would lick the daylights out of you and maybe kick you down the front steps. Your city editor, I suspect, manufactured this story to make us all miserable. Or something like that. You've already admitted that he has no use for you, and everybody knows how the *Gazette* has been fighting father."

My fists clench and for a moment I can feel the city editor's throat in my grip. He isn't playing a square game and is determined at the very start to break me. Very well, if that is the way he feels about it, two of us can play tag. There may be a way to get even with him.

"I suppose the city editor lied. Likely what he did was send me up here so he could find out how I would act. Now that I think of it, he wouldn't put a green man on an important story like this. Had he really believed you had eloped, the most experienced men on the staff would have covered the assignment. That's only reasonable. Don't you think so?"

Marie is on her feet in an instant, doing a step or two that makes me look at her in amazement, for certainly here is an unusual girl.

"What we'll do is make him like it, and like it right. Recently I read the story of a cub reporter sent out to do the impossible. Instead of getting caught in the trap he gets a story a hundred times better than the one the city editor sent him on. I'm going to fix it up for you because you are Tisha's brother. Well, won't we make this city editor down at your factory look as yellow as the mustard on a cowardly hot dog?"

I'm wondering about the secret, but all I say is:

"That's fine." It is good to hear her talk. "How are you going about it?"

"You might give me an opportunity to think." She puckers her brows and I try to guess what is passing through that little head of hers. She is absolutely too delightfully charming, I decide. "You don't happen to be in love, do you?"

"Not lately," I answer.

"That's perfect. But you have a girl, of course?"

"Girl?" I scoff. "I'm not one of these girl complex persons. I can do better than that with my time." I do not think it necessary to explain that only two weeks before I have broken off with Milly Kennedy, to whom for six weeks or more I think I am engaged. It is just as well for Marie Hogan not to know everything.

To begin with, Marie knows my sister well enough to borrow money from her. In this life of ours strange things happen. Why, Marie and I might become friends—pals even. The only trouble is that she's the daughter of Old Man Hogan and he is too big a person in Los Angeles to get gay with. There isn't much chance, after all, I decide, but that is no reason why I should shed tears and recite the story of my past life.

Marie goes to the telephone and dials a number.

"You, Patsy?" she asks. "This is Marie . . . Yes, Marie Hogan—how many Maries do you know? I haven't seen you for two nights! What's happened to you? . . . Oh, is that so? That's a good one. Well, Patsy, I've decided . . . Yes. . . . Yes, I say I've decided. Heavens, man, but you're dense. I'm going to elope. . . . Elope, yes. Elope. E—l—o—p—e. That's the way they spelled it when I went to school. Meet me at Sixth and Broadway. . . . Yes. At seven o'clock. . . . Seven o'clock, yes. . . . Oh, I guess you can make it. I'll have a friend with me. . . . All right. Good-by."

Then she turns to me. "That's how we're going to fix your city editor. He sent you here on a wild-goose chase, to get an elopement that didn't happen. But there's going to be an elopement, all right. I'm the sweet thing who is going to elope. And you're going to help me and be in on the ground floor. Wait here until I get on some different clothes. One doesn't elope in the dress one has been cooking dinner in, now does one?"

Cooking dinner—Marie Hogan cooking dinner! That is too much.

BUT yes, sir, that's what Old Man Hogan's daughter has been doing—cooking. And in such a dress—a dress as dainty as herself. Still she can afford it for when one has money all things are possible—even cooking. There is no question about the Hogans having money—a cut in every nickel the nice ladies and gentlemen leave at the door when they enter a street car.

We meet Patsy Maloney at Sixth and Broadway, parking on a corner and holding up traffic while he asks questions and takes time to make up his mind if it is safe to come with us. He inspects me cautiously and with a fine look of suspicion. Two traffic cops smile at the pleasant episode on the corner, for they recognize Marie, and apparently anything a traction magnate's daughter does is perfectly jake with them.

This Patsy Maloney lad twists himself into a question mark as he gets into Marie's nice car and leans forward in the attitude of a person who is curious but is afraid someone will snap at him. He's good looking, all right, but there isn't as much Irish about him, his features especially, as I like to see in a man named Patsy Maloney. His pop owns a few dozen banks scattered around California, and Patsy, as I learn, devotes most of his time evading dad's efforts to teach him the business. So far, Patsy has not advanced beyond the check writing stage. His name on a bottom line is good anywhere, even at Tia Juana—which may be taken as an indication that a man has arrived.

Patsy is tall, with padded shoulders and trousers wide at the shoe top. He wears loud socks to keep his feet from going to sleep. He has eyes like turtle doves and fingers stained from too many cigarets. We shoot out Broadway and Patsy asks:

"Now, Marie, old girl, let's have it again. What is this thing you're up to?"

"How many times do I have to explain?" Marie wants to know. "Can't you understand what a lady means when she says she is about to elope?"

Patsy falls back into his question mark attitude and gives a gasp that sounds like Mount Vesuvius showing off for the customers.

"Of course that's what you've been saying, but I thought you must be joking."

"I mean it."

"Well, that's immense," he agrees with a short laugh. "It's just like you, Marie, to do something like that." He gives me one of his turtle dove looks. "I suppose I must now congratulate our friend?"

"Our friend?" Marie asks sharply. "What has Mr. O'Malley got to do with it?"

"In that case who are you eloping with, Marie? That is if you do not object to such a personal question."

Marie's lips come together in an impatient line as she turns for an instant to look at him.

"The person with whom I am eloping, Patsy," she says, "is *you*."

"With me!" he explodes, his eyes like balloons.

"Why not? You've asked me often enough to marry you, haven't you? I made up my mind long ago that finally

I'd accept you. Well, here I am accepting. Only there will not be any church wedding. We'll get a license, go to some little parish and be married by a priest that neither of us heard of before and who doesn't know me as Old Man Hogan's daughter. If we are going to get married, we might as well do it in a way that will create a little comment. We can't ever get a divorce, so our wedding must make up for what we will lack in that respect. For one thing I want to see what the newspapers will do."

Friend Patsy wilts at that. He stares at Marie with his mouth open, and his teeth look as if someone should put snubbers on them.

"Why—why—Marie," he says feebly, "I thought that business was over. You said no so often that I took you at your word. How—how could I do anything but take you at your word? When a girl keeps saying no, no, no? Nothing but no. You wouldn't give me any hope so I went and——"

The fact that his parachute failed to open does not keep him back. Only he has a tough time landing on his feet.

"Then," he continues with a new gasp, "after you keep saying no, no, no, I think for dead sure you don't like me well enough to marry me, so I go and——"

"For pity sake," I put in impatiently, "what do you go and do?" It is disconcerting the way our upper classes act.

"Why I—I get engaged. I get engaged to Dora Freeman."

Marie's arms stiffen, then shake, and the car wobbles as it speeds on where she sends it in her surprise.

"Will it be by a rabbi?" I ask.

"Why not?" he wants to know, his chin sticking out. "There's nothing wrong with a rabbi is there? And let me tell you I don't like the way you ask the question. Who are you to get familiar with me?"

"Hold your horses there," I blaze. "And don't go talking to me that way, for I won't have it."

Marie drives over to the curb.

"Get out," she says, measuring her words. "Get out, Patsy Maloney, and don't let me ever hear from you again, or see you. And don't forget that you're going to pay for this—this affront."

"Now, Marie, listen; let me explain."

"Explain?" she repeats frigidly. "What is there to explain more than you already have said?"

Patsy makes a move to get out, his face wrathful when it should be white from shame.

"Hold on," I explode. "Not so fast. Wait a minute; this business ain't over yet. Let us be our mental age, which in one case ain't much. Miss Hogan has been joking about this elopement; such an idea never entered her head. She has been trying to be entertaining and, I think, for my benefit. That's the way I dope it out."

Marie's fingers play a tattoo on the wheel as she stares straight ahead.

"And then you come along and can't see it," I tell Patsy. "That's what makes me sore. A lady suggests that you elope with her and you ain't gentleman enough to say, 'Sure, let's go.' You're about as big as minus nothing. And I suppose you go around boasting of your Irish blood."

"Not much he don't," protests Marie like a chilly blast. "And if ever he does and I hear about it, it won't go well with him."

Patsy has the door of the car open and is stepping out.

"Restrain yourself," I instruct. "You act as if you thought an island was a place where the bottom sticks up through the ocean. Pour some glue on the working part of your pants and stick. This is the night you elope and you elope good and plenty. It ain't going to be long before you are an unhappy bridegroom. You might as well make up your mind to it; you're going to play fair with the little lady here."

"Mr. O'Malley," Marie levels her chilly words at me, "you will please attend to your own business. I wouldn't marry this man if he were to ask me a million times and then go out and commit suicide. I wanted to do you a favor or something. No, that isn't right. I'll tell you the truth. I've heard about this person here and the Freeman girl. I wanted to find out how much truth there was to it. Father has been pestering me about Patsy and what a fine match he would make. Maybe Old Man Hogan will be satisfied when he hears what has happened just now."

"Just the same," I inform her, "we've started out to hold an elopement, and an elopement we are going to have. I can't get along with anything else. I have my newspaper to consider, you know."

"Your what?" Patsy gasps.

"Oh, yes, Mr. O'Malley is a newspaper reporter," smiles Marie disagreeably. "No doubt all this will be on the first page of the *Gazette* tomorrow morning. I hope it is. And I hope they use my picture and a comic drawing of you, Patsy Maloney."

"My God," wails Patsy, wringing his hands. "That will end everything between me and Dora."

"There's going to be an elopement story on the first page of the *Gazette* in the morning, ladies and gentlemen," I inform them sternly. "And this manly mistake here, and you, Miss Hogan, are to be the leading figures. I'm going to teach this fancy bird a lesson he won't forget for a while—playing with the feelings of an innocent maiden. He ought to be ashamed of himself, and it's time someone brought him down a peg. I've just nominated myself as the little boy to perform."

I give her the wink, very sly, and she catches it on the bounce. After that there is a thorough understanding between us.

"I did love you, Marie, really I did, and I still think a lot of you," Patsy almost blubbers, "but you kept saying you wouldn't marry me, and how was I to know?"

"Fool," I snap. "Ain't you old enough to know that when a girl says no she means yes?"

All he does is glare at me murderously.

"I bet when you go into the park it's hard to tell you from the squirrels; you're always chattering," I authorize myself to say. "Drive out in the country, Miss Hogan. You can get a license as soon as we can find an office open in the morning, and then we'll go around to some priest and have the trick performed. What do you say to that?"

"Dandy," she exclaims, giving me a wink on her own account. I don't know how matters are going to turn out but I have faith in Marie, who shows signs of a level head. She'll be there when the time comes for action.

"It's a plain case of kidnaping," Patsy whines. "You are making me do something against my own free will, and that's a prison offense in a free country."

"Oh, shut up," I instruct. "Who told you this was a free country, in the first place? And call it anything you want, including arson and housemaid's knee. Call it anything you want because you're going to do what I say. If you don't like my ways I'm sorry. I have a little popgun in my pocket here that is capable of making you see reason." With that I show him my pretty six-shooter. Patsy shuts his eyes and shudders and I take it that he has no stomach for violence. Blamed if I understand some of these people who pretend to be Irish.

"Riverside would be as good a place as any other," I surmise and Marie wonders if that would be far enough away. So I suggest that if Riverside does not register sufficient distance, there is Canada. Or Mexico City, as a sporting proposition. She decides we'll just naturally keep on driving and see. Something may happen.

"It'll be too late to get a story in the morning paper," I worry.

"There always is a day after tomorrow," Marie chides. Say, but she is lovely sitting there at the wheel, enjoying our little stunt immensely, and I can't keep my eyes off her. Oh, Lord, I think, why does she have to be Old Man Hogan's daughter! If only she had a poor man for a father. She's classy, you understand, but not uppish nor flapperish, the way we think of such things, and she's beyond my reach. As the car swerves, our shoulders touch and that sends a thrill through me like an electric shock. I don't believe any of us speak for a couple of hours; I know Patsy, there in the back seat, a bundle of misery, scarcely moves. Marie has become as mysterious as a sawing-a-woman-in-tw act. And I like her for it and sit there watching her from the corner of my eye and, I guess, worshiping her. Other times I try to look at the pretty billboards but the scenery is in the way.

IT IS just before dawn that she turns from the main traveled highway into a bumpy road. We are out near the desert now and the country is not very thickly settled. We pass a ranch-house now and then, that is all. The bumpy road is deserted.

Suddenly Marie stops the car by the side of the road. She does not look at Patsy, only says:

"This is where our elopement takes place. All right, Patsy dear, you think so much of yourself, you may get out now and commune with the first person non-possessive. Any place you go from here will require you to do your own hiking."

"What?" stammers Patsy. "You're not——"

"Indeed, I guess I am. This is your jumping off place. *Get out!*"

Patsy crawls slowly from the car, gritting his teeth, I surmise, and casting a look of hate at me and another variety of look at Marie that I am not able to analyze.

"I shall not forget this, Miss Hogan," he rasps faintly.

"You don't suppose I have gone to all this trouble for nothing, do you? Had I thought you'd forget it, I wouldn't have brought you here. Remember me to Miss Freeman when you see her, and give her my love. Good-by."

The car is moving again as Marie speaks. When we pass a bend in the road and are out of sight of Patsy she stops the car so she can laugh in comfort. I'm afraid she is going into hysterics but after a while she calms herself and asks:

"How did you know I was only having a little fun, with all this talk about an elopement?"

"Oh, were you?" I ask innocently. "How like a woman!"

"Now don't go springing anything like that."

"I'm displeased about one thing. I won't have an elopement story about Miss Hogan in the paper, after all. And the city editor will not think any more of me for that."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, although I did lead you on. It was nice of you to threaten to shoot Patsy. I appreciate that more than anything else. That is what I call standing by a strange lady. Yes, it does look as if you and the city editor person were in for a session."

"Well," I sigh, "it doesn't matter. I made up my mind hours ago that I do not intend to go back. I've been convinced for almost a week that I'm not cut out for newspaper reporting. I may brace your pop for a job as conductor on one of his pretty yellow street cars. Only, with all these patent arrangements, conducting isn't as profitable as it used to be, I am told."

She is thoughtful for a minute and does not seem to hear what I say about a job with Old Man Hogan, which is quite all right, for I don't mean what I say.

"It isn't fair not to have an elopement after all this pretense. I've been driving along here wondering; and thinking how patient you have been with me during these hours of relaxation. You have even offered to use a deadly weapon in my interest, which is something no man has ever done—and I thank you. I am glad though about Patsy and Miss Freeman. Her father happens to be worth a couple of million dollars more than Old Man Hogan and that means something to him. But I'm Old Man Hogan's daughter and shall continue to be. I'm sorry you've missed out on your elopement story."

I am the kind of a person able to resist everything except temptation.

"We might elope—the two of us," I chirp, expecting her to turn on me and likely order me from the car.

"I've been thinking about that," she says simply. "Only I think I know a better way."

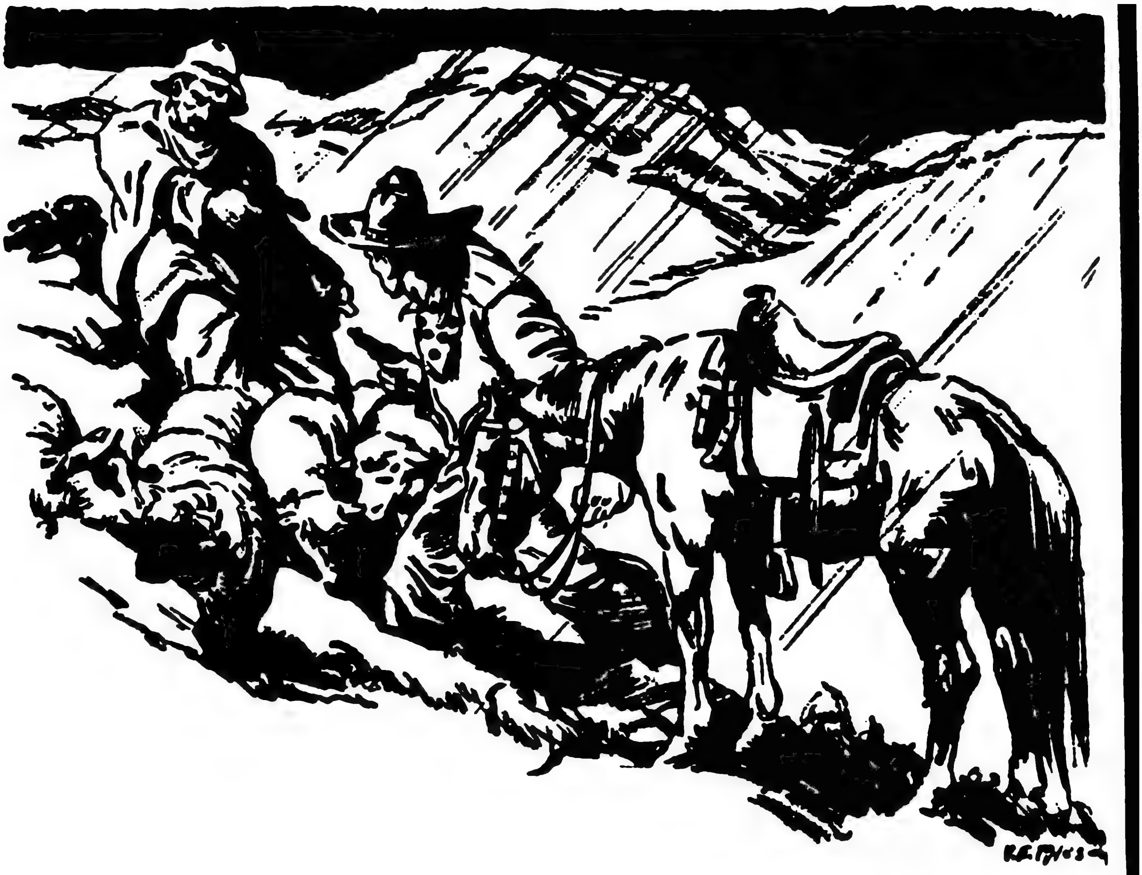
"What's that?" I ask, prepared for death and destruction.

"Why, the regular way," she replies, turning to me, her face aglow. "When I get married I want bridesmaids and wedding presents and a high mass."

"Check," I answer, and then, as they do in the movies, we drive off into the desert sunrise and wind up by racing our car into a ditch with me getting a cut on the chin and Marie shocking me by saying "Damn!" after she comes out of her faint.

"I suppose we'd been killed had we decided to elope," I suggest, after we climb out of the vehicle and Patsy Maloney drives past us in a hired car on his way home to Los Angeles.

I can see him looking back at us and laughing.



CHAPTER I

THE SCHOOL BULLIES

A GOOD many people liked Bert Rudabon. His manner was pleasant, his voice gentle and his eyes gem blue. Dark hair waved in long curls over his brow, and his face was thin, his complexion even, a dark cream which colored frequently as rich blood suffused his cheeks. The corners of his full lips lifted in a smile, flashing longer or shorter as though measuring amusement or humor in whatever he saw or heard. They called him "Laughing Bert" in the Union High School at Blizzard Valley, as the village was known before it changed its name to Water Table, just as truly significant.

To the Union High School came district pupils from the Palette Mountains at the north, a land where cows and sheep quite lately had suffered under the rivalries of their owners. Other students were from down the Lingering River bottoms, where great dark alfalfa, corn and other crop rectangles were watered by irrigation ditches fed from artesian wells and natural springs.

The youth, Rudabon, was tall and slender, square shouldered, and restlessly attracted the attention of his classmates and the teachers. He prowled about the huge red brick buildings, into everything; studying, parties, gym contests, debating, games. He was elected president of the class by acclamation. He played a banjo, piano, or some absurd instrument made of tissue paper and a comb, and always made everyone laugh.

Put Dartley physically resembled Bert in only one particular. His eyes were of the same crystalline clarity, blue, but a slate rather than a cerulean color. Put was gaunt, shambling, his legs and arms long, his face freckled and ugly, though there was in his narrow lips a graceful line and his teeth were beautiful, if for any reason he chanced to flash a smile. Put came down out of the north pasture lands. His father, a cowman, had been killed under circumstances never solved, as he rode home to his ranch one afternoon. Put was, therefore, a boy of the corral and unfenced mountains.

He rode horseback to school, living in a small, neat 'dobe shack down on a high knoll surrounded by cottonwoods, close to Lingual Creek, just where the cultivated lands began and the pastures of the north

A Complete Novelette

The KILLERS *of* BLIZZARD BASIN

Here Is an Intensely Dramatic Story of the West, a Tale of the Surging Forces of Feud and Conflict that Swept Ruthlessly over a Far, Fair Land

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

ended. His father had owned a water-hole section there, and the 'dobe cabin had been used by line riders when the Bar Question brand cattle ranged over half a thousand square miles. Sometimes Put was alone in the cabin; again he would have a cowboy for company; then a family of Mexicans working the land stopped two days and gave him a place at their meals. And in school Put was absorbed, if not by his lessons, then by affairs relating to his widowed mother's domain, which remained something more than a hundred thousand acres.

At the first there came a clash, when Put Dartley came down from the district school to the Union High. Bert Rudabon saw a gangling youth on a rugged, homely horse swing into the school corral and tie to a rail. Then the youth took off the saddle and blanket, to ease the animal, and threw down a good feed of broken corn and oats, pinning a square of canvas for the grain, on the ground.

"Welcome to the founts of learning!" Rudabon greeted the newcomer with the hateful politeness of sophomore for freshman.

The youth thus addressed surveyed Rudabon with interest, eyes first, then hair, then a spot on his tie, the set of his shoulders and the size of his feet.

"Thank-ee," Dartley presently commented as Rudabon's smile narrowed with an odd, tempery sparkle of his eyes. "Reckon there's any left?"

"Any what left?" the sophomore asked, incautiously.

"Learning, after yo' was through."

Rudabon stared, obviously not catching the meaning—in him a rare failure. To his look of inquiring puzzlement the riding youth made further explanatory remark.

"I reckoned you might of took all there was the way yo' climbed yo' high horse, suh."

A dry sparkle flared across Rudabon's brilliant eyes while his lips flashed a quick, wide, rather loose smile, his nose lifting into an expression which might be good humor or a sneer. Now he understood the suggestion that perhaps he thought he knew it all. There was nothing he could say, so he did not speak. There was not much fun for his crowd in this fellow. With a shrug he turned with the sophomores who had come to see the fun and didn't know when they found a hatful.

Sitting in the single seat of a light road sulky, just over from the scene of the episode, was a girl wearing a blue sunbonnet and plain gingham dress. She had arrived early and had waited quietly and unnoticed during the interchange. When the group of young bullies withdrew, carrying their discomfiture with them, she studied the young cowman who stood leaning against his horse, with an arm up and along the animal's back, his face turned at the ground with no expression except a deepening of color.

His rough facial lines suddenly hardened and he took three strides to where his blanket and saddle hung on a high rail. As he seized them he heard a quick, low exclamation.

"Oh, don't let them drive you away!"

He threw up his head, looked over his right shoulder and caught the swift color of a blush as the girl who had spoken, not realizing she was talking aloud, shivered back in embarrassment. For an instant the two gazed at each other, both badly embarrassed and unable to speak for relief. Then he took complete advantage of his opportunity thus presented. He drew back from his horse gear and strode with long, lifting steps across the school ground on his way to register, enroll, or whatever it was he must do to stay. As he went by he heard a group of youths break into low laughter, not one of whom resembled him in clothes, bearing, type, quality or character.

No one knew him. The Bar Question brand outfit traded over in Eagle Feather where cow and sheep outfits found supplies which the farmer stores down in the irrigation project town of Water Table did not carry, the merchants being newcomers, like the settlers. The pupils did not grasp the significance of the name as it appeared at the daily roll calls. They just saw an odd, gangling, plodding youth out of the wide open pastures, against whom Bert Rudabon directed the sophomore efforts to tame and tune, as the natural leader called the process.

The girl who came in a sulky attracted no such unfavorable notice. She was June Spark—a name which she measured up to well and plenty. When the sheep and cattle troubles were settled, the cows were left to range the open lands west of Lingual Creek, while the sheep worked to the Palette Mountains in both cedar and pine countries east of Lingual Valley. Division according to the water quite nicely added to the separation of the herds and bands. Now, the Spark sheep were a right important factor in the outlying regions of Blizzard Valley. June chose to dress simply and work quietly. At the same time, among the girls, she soon grouped up with those of similar tastes and inclinations.

It chanced that June Spark was observing Put Dartley when he definitely connected her with her name. Miss Revole, the English teacher, had addressed June by name. On the instant, as she rose to answer some question or other, she saw the youth staring at her, his eyes ablaze. With difficulty she retained her composure. The Spark sheep had invaded the Dartley cow pastures, forced a compromise in grim warfare, and when Bar Question Dartley was found shot dead, apparently it was a hangover killing from the slow dying range feud. The youth connected her with her people, sure enough. Her chin lifted when she saw his expression.

THE effort to show Put Dartley his place in sophomore estimation continued week after week. Something in Put's eyes, physique, expression prevented direct efforts. He found chewing gum spread along the cracks of his seat. He found some of his books blotted. He received quite a few taunting notes embellished with illustrations. Nevertheless, he gave no visible indication of his feelings. Coming in on Sunday nights he occupied the old 'dobe line cabin until Friday afternoon, when he would ride away to his ranch home beyond the mountain range toward the northeast. His relief on his departure was a curious commentary on the attractiveness of obtaining an education.

Bert Rudabon found Dartley intractable material. Bert was the son of a widow, Mrs. Verona Rudabon. Her husband had been obliged to sell out a good shoe business in New England to find health in the arid lands. He had come to Blizzard Valley almost at the beginning of its boom, fallen for the promises of enormous profits and died in the midst of the disappointment when he learned that the rising water table under his numerous bottom land acres was salt and poison to most crops. He had been swindled. His widow was bright enough immediately to dispose of all her holdings to other hopefuls who were new to local conditions. Now Mrs. Rudabon had a nice little income and was giving her son Bert "the advantages."

Bert Rudabon, Pete Hensel, Mike Pirqual, Buttons Marvane and two or three others, on a Saturday night, went over to the 'dobe house at the Bar Question water claim where Put spent his nights during the school week. Reconnoitering, they made sure no one was there. They found the old hewn plank door brass-padlocked, but easily lifted the hinges apart and went inside. They were surprised by the one room comfort.

A student lamp on the table illuminated the interior, with its big fireplace, its corner reserved for cooking, table and food necessities. There were several hides on the floor, that of a shaggy horse, two steer and a cougar skin among them. The bed was made of rough poles, with rawhide laced for a mattress, piled with thick goat hair and wool blankets.

Over the mantel stretched two enormous glossy black horns, with silver tips. A spare saddle, extra boots, some clothes for special occasions, a Mexican peaked black hat, fancifully ornamented, a bunch of latigo rawhide strings, a pair of batwing chaps, a corner full of chunks of firewood which had come down the creek in spring or cloudburst freshets, all looked quite like ranch line cabin or even main outfit things. But there were a number of books on the table and a fancy bookcase over against the wall which contained a good deal of required reading as well as the kinds of books which people read when they don't have to.

The intruders looked around in some doubt and wonder. The youth, Rudabon, emerged first from his feeling of awe. This was part of the great Bar Question ranch outfit. Heretofore they had not really connected Put Dartley with the private cattle pasture. They had never thought of Dartley as the son of the man who had, before they came there, been shot down a few miles up the valley.

Rudabon took a handful of newspapers from the table and, lighting them, threw them into the fireplace. Then he threw magazines at the blazing wad. One of the boys threw a bound book, Scott's "Ivanhoe." And the spectators saw it burning with feelings of satisfaction, since they were obliged to read it for their English; the Lord, not they, knowing why.

The incipient mischief led as usual to deliberate vandalism. They had never been able visibly to penetrate to the consciousness of Put Dartley, so now they wreaked their spleen against his indifference, or rather his deeper engrossment in other matters than their own efforts to bother him. Hardly realizing what they were actually doing, they did this and that under whimsical dislike, or careless malice, and opened cans of peaches, a box of raisins, and cracked to eat a lot of mixed nuts which indicated the ranch youth's solid comfort of living.

It was late when they sneaked away, uneasily conscious of their raid. They declared among themselves that they were glad of it. Put Dartley was stuck up, never came out with the boys, and ignored the mandates of the sophomores as to what kind of headgear he should wear. He had caught one of them, Buttons Marvane, trying to do something with the gray Stetson of cowboy model which Put always wore. Buttons had a black eye for at least two weeks. Put had been summoned before Superintendent Witchell, and told that fighting was contrary to the school rules.

"When people try to knife my twenty-five dollar hat, ruining it," Put said, "it isn't against my regulations to protect my property. I ain't going to apologize, Professor. If you try to make me, I'll state my case in Public Court, before the Board of Education, or wherever it's necessary."

"Oh, I see! I didn't understand," the superintendent backed down rather obliquely. He had always believed hazing was a good discipline for proud and untamed youths. He hadn't noticed that generally the hazing was applied to diffident and weakling youths, not to the high-spirited and the bullies, to the ones who already have the nerve, or impudence, to lead mobbing gangs.

So now the Blizzard Valley sophomores took revenge behind the back of the boy they dared not meet face to face. They scattered, going to their homes, where they crept as silently as possible into their own lairs. When the following day they chanced to meet others of their raiding band, they spoke of the pleasure they would have watching the discomfiture of their victim, giving versions of what they expected him to do.

But Put Dartley gave no sign either on Monday or any other day of that week. He spoke to no one about the condition in which he had found his cabin. On Tuesday afternoon, when school had been dismissed, Put saw a Bar Question cowboy going by, driving a four horse wagon team. Put mounted his horse, and rode off down the road toward the newly named rail end village of Jubilee. The following morning Put was called to the telephone; and Rudabon, who was downstairs, heard him tell the cowboy he'd better take out a barrel of molasses and have the station agent throw out six cars for shipping the cuts from the Bar Question siding, instead of four.

THE raid on the 'dobe having been so unsatisfactory, the same youths tried another one two weeks later. They found the cabin had been all picked up and the rawhide thongs, which held up the bunk skins had been respliced. They laughed, thinking of the discomfiture of their victim when the supports let him fall to the floor. They played the same old trick, and tried some new ones. The books they had burned had not been replaced, but of course there were some canned goods and dried fruits in the cupboard which they ate with relish and in quantities. They left with less feelings of conscience than on the previous raid; for nothing had happened.

"Come the holidays," Rudabon laughed, "we'll have a picnic then!"

Apparently Put Dartley was a bear for punishment. He gave no tiniest indication that he had found anything amiss. The boys, his classmates, knew that his indifference was all just put on. Anyhow, he wasn't going to have so much better times than they were, having that fine cabin, just like a millionaire's camp, all for himself, without some trouble.

" 'Tisn't right," Rudabon declared, "some of these rich boys having everything they want or need, without doing anything for it. No, sir! Dartley's mother's a widow and she gives him everything in the world. Look at the horses he has. And he's no mixer, never showing up at any of the school doings, or helping us out contributing or anything. I bet he has more pocket money than all of the rest of us put together! Next time we'll put over a new one on him——"

"What's that, Rudy?" Hensel asked.

"Might's well tell you now," Rudabon grinned. "You gather all the sandburs and stickers you can. We'll fix him!"

A snort of laughter greeted the thought of what they would do to bedclothes and garments when the time came, during the school vacation of midwinter.

The holidays were merry enough. The approach of the season of good will saw Put Dartley carrying bundles to the 'dobe cabin, things meant for his friends and family, it appeared.

"He's rich!" Rudabon sneered. "He can spend money right and left!"

Rudabon had begun his bullying in a mood of high superiority. In three months he was slurring the youth who had ignored him because of advantages and heartiness of indifference. Rudabon had been unable to penetrate the shell with which Dartley was encased.

"We'll fix him next time!" Rudabon laughed, mirthlessly.

Accordingly, on Christmas evening, the miscreants, seven of them, gathered in the cabin which was locked as usual, but they entered by pulling the padlock staples. Within, they found the cabin but little changed. Damages had been roughly repaired. The bed was made up on the floor, the cut up bedstead thrown into the corner for firewood. The cupboard had been carefully cleaned of the wanton mess left there. There were cans of fruits and vegetables, a bag of nuts, another pound of eating raisins and a fruit jar full of fine bonbons, apparently the remains of the ranch boy's feastings.

The raiders had half a bushel of sandburs and stickles, shaved cactus thorns and other disagreeable things. These they left outside while they sat around the fireplace in the pleasant heat which they might have had with the comradery of an old time cattle ranch spirit to boot, only they preferred to abuse a stranger rather than make him happy.

They passed around the raisins, bonbons, opened cans of peaches and pears, eating with careless hunger. They ate a good and plenty, too. They ate too much, so that for a time they sat there, first one and then another with expressions on his face which indicated overindulgence in sweets.

Uneasily, staring dubiously into the fireplace, taking sidelong glances at one another, the joyous talk with which they foretold what that rough and wealthy ranch boy would do when he began to roll in his blankets, which were to be filled with sticklebururs and other stinging weeds, flagged swiftly. Lips turned bluish, cheeks whitened, even in the red flaring of the fireplace. Rudabon's hand tentatively and covertly rubbed along his belt. He felt something beneath stirring, like a long, legless, uneasy animal.

He turned with widening eyes, his grin terrific in its mirthless humor.

"I feel funny," he whispered.

"So do I!" the others gasped, one adding, "You don't suppose he——"

"Poison!" somebody cried out shrilly. "He wouldn't. He dassn't to!"

Starting to their feet, frightened, two weakly dropped to their knees. Something was wrong. Their teeth chattered and they headed as with one mind for the door. They scrambled and fairly fought to be the first to rush out, gasping and crying. First one and then another succeeded in plunging into the open air which was stinging with breathless winter cold.

One of the boys fell, groaning, drawn up in anguish of terror and stomach trouble. The others, everyone for himself, stumbled and staggered on their way home. All were overtaken by their own miseries. Breathless in their spasms, unable even to cry out, they all endured the preliminaries of death by poison. At least in their fancies.

"He got us—he poisoned us!" Rudabon whimpered all alone where he had come and dropped at a fence corner trying a short cut to home in town.

CHAPTER II

A YOUNG KILLER

PUT DARTLEY returned for the January school opening, the same as usual. He heavily blanketed his homely old cow pony to protect it against the stinging winter wind. He looked neither to the right nor left, gave no sign of perturbation or triumph. He saw, however, a group of youths who stood with twitching countenances over at the entrance to the administration headquarters. Put turned his face imperturbably to survey their glaring eyes. And their gaze, not his, dropped or turned away.

Bert Rudabon alone held his look, eye to eye. Rudabon's face was not twitching. He was smiling, his face lifting back on both jaws, clear into his temples. Laughter creases were in the corners of his eyes. His nostrils lifted, though, and the bright blue crystalline of his eyes was as cold as the sparkling wintry sky which shone, utterly cloudless, overhead.

Dartley shoved his hand into his trousers' pocket and withdrew a beautiful, heavy, four bladed pearl knife, with a heavy whittling blade, a manicure tweezer file and other implements. It was a fine and useful tool, as well as ornamental. On an inlaid strip of silver had been engraved two nearly microscopic lines:

Bertrand Rudabon
Mother's Christmas

The knife was bright and new.

"Reckon you lost this," Dartley remarked, casually, quietly, even with a twinkle as though he was particularly glad to restore a valued trinket.

Rudabon stared at the knife. He had missed it. He could not remember what had become of it, nor where he last had used it. Now the memory emerged from the byway alleys of his mind. He had whittled English walnuts, pecans, niggertoe Brazils and other shucks that Christmas night in Dartley's 'dobe house where the cowboy boarded himself, leaving candies, raisins and canned stuff lying around even after his cabin had twice been raided. Rudabon reached to take the knife, watched by the slate-blue eyes of the youth returning the gift. Rudabon backed away with it, still grinning, his eyes still sparkling as he kept them direct on the one who had, with so kindly a thoughtfulness of action, returned the mother's gift.

But Mike Pirqual and Buttons Marvane stared at the scene, studied the knife and then drew away from the two, especially from Rudabon. They were surely alarmed. The gaze of Dartley diverted to them, though apparently he was looking them all in the eyes, now.

"Reckon I found a bag of yore fodder, bristles an' spines," Dartley remarked, "down there by my cabin. Yo' all come get it. Tote it out of that."

Rudabon would not have done this thing. The two ducked their heads. Yes, they would go after that bag of burs. They started on the instant, though this would make them late for the winter term of school commencement. They brought away the bag, gingerly enough, and burned it, burlap and all, on the neutral ground of a salty field, abandoned to tax sales.

For a few weeks Rudabon continued to go to school. Whispers ran the rounds, so that the girls who had admired him openly began to laugh as they met, passing him by. He smiled in return; then one day disappeared, no one knowing what had become of him. The replacement of admiration with ridicule, and the contempt of those he had bullied, stung through the fiber of his egotism to the quick of his sensitive longing for adulation. His mother denied that she knew where he had gone, yet asked neither county sheriff nor village marshal to look for him.

The youth who had come down from the great ranch to obtain book learning held through to the end of the school year. Despite his air of indifference and his grim steadfastness, studying his books, he shrugged his shoulders when his teachers particularly sought him out to bid him good-by for the summer. To one of these, Miss Revole, he said:

"What's the use? I reckon I'm fit for tracking hiding-out cows or chasing coyotes, tha's all!"

"Put, you've improved wonderfully. In another year . . . Surely, you aren't going to quit till you've been to college!"

"I'm ill favored." He shook his head. "I cain't even talk right!"

There was no use trying to argue with him. He knew. The young rascals who had taken advantage of their pertness and mobbed egotism were responsible for his discouragement and unhappiness. He could despise them, but their cruelty, changing to sheer envy and malice, had cut the rope of his efforts to climb higher in mental powers in order to command effectively the duties which more and more were devolving on his ability for responsible management and accomplishment. For a moment he had endured triumph, when he returned Rudabon the knife which could have been used as evidence for court action, had not the ranch youth preferred another and even more humiliating dose of exceedingly effective medicines stowed away where the raiders would most assuredly eat them in ample, and even oversupply, quantities.

MONTHS later, in November, he was trailing a herd of yearlings for corn feeding in the big corn belt, dusty, tired, resigned to his life as it seemed to stretch away ahead of him growing prime beef stock. Even *he* could not drive his cattle in the usual highways on account of the Forest Service signs which read:

ALL STOCK MUST USE
THE OLD TRAIL

The right of way had been taken from herds and flocks. The public and government seemed for the time to relegate the meat croppers to one side. Sensitive to the tiny but significant indications of sentiment, the boy who was taking up the big jobs of the great Bar Question ranch humped his shoulders a little more and continued to say nothing at all to his hired fellows with whom he shared the dirty work of the trailing.

It chanced, though, that where the old trail crossed the fine new road along the range, a motion of something raising a dust drew the quick attention of Dartley so that he saw coming over in the south a horse rig, wheels lifting the dust that way. For a time he gazed steadfastly at the outfit, then glanced covertly around him at the drivers of the cattle. He was just going along with the shippers, supervising, with the matter of taking care of the railroad papers yet to come.

At the plowed ditch beside the new road he quietly swung down out of his saddle to set it right. If there was a wrinkle in his blanket, he caught and smoothed it out. If either of his cinches was out of taut, too loose or too tight, he remedied that bit of mischance. He also made sure that the bridle was just according.

By this time, the swinging pacer which was bringing the wheels along the new contract highway had arrived directly opposite where the youth was so meticulously busy. The vehicle was a rubber tired sulky, the horse a fine, handsome, blooded pacer, and the driver was none other than June Spark, at sight of whom he gave a quick start. The girl from the sheepfold laughed, as she stopped her horse with a quick, low "Whoa!"

Perhaps the cowboys herding the steers along had been fooled, first along anyhow, by Bert's stop. Now not one even glanced back. They just strictly minded their own business. The girl just laughed lightly as she saucily surveyed the youth from whose hat brim, as he bowed, the dust fell, and from whose clothes, as he bent, the alkali cascaded from wrinkles and lodgments.

The girl's smile set with just a tinge of scorn. He felt her change of temper like a high mesa wind in a shadow.

"You've quit school?". she demanded, sharply.

"Yes," he nodded.

"Why?"

"Why—I was needed around the outfit," he replied, hesitating.

"Course, I know what it means if I call—uh-h—anyone a liar," she remarked.

His eyes shot a glance of resentment followed instantly by an intensive study of a pattern he was drawing with the toe of one old, sagging down leather boot, thickly wrinkled at the ankle where the worn batwing chap ended. He colored frankly. He knew what she meant. Educated he would be a great deal more useful to the Bar Question than doing, as he was now, work the trail boss or even a twenty-five-dollar-a-month-and-board Down East lunger could do to greater advantage.

"Yes," he said after a while, "I've quit school. For good!"

"For bad!" she corrected impatiently. "There's no for good about it. How come?"

"Why, I don't know," he mused, "I just reckon I didn't fit."

"That's foolish. And you know it!"

"I don't know it, Ju-uh, Miss Spark." He shook his head. "I couldn't see as I was heading anywhere——"

"That's nonsense." She spoke with a woman's freedom. "You stood top the heap, a man among a crowd of—well, us kids. I suppose you don't read any books. You've just set your mind on growing up into one of those old time wrinkled pioneers."

"What else'd I be?" he asked, and by his tone she knew he had pondered long on that difficult question.

"A business man. Write your correspondence on a typewriter, have Bar Question letter heads, daily reports, cost systems and overhead estimates, make provision in a sinking fund against seven years of drought, study weather records to locate nearest green pastures, measure water supplies. A big business instead of just hit-or-miss ten per cent loss estimate when it's twenty-seven per cent one year and five per cent another year."

"You doing that for sheep?" he asked, and when he had spoken he realized he had used that cattleman tone in saying "sheep."

She hesitated for an instant, glaring at him with all the indifference of sheep people for cows. She colored.

"Yes," she answered crisply. "That's precisely what I'm doing."

She turned to her horse, spoke in a low voice and the big pacer surged forward in a quick getaway. She did not look back. Dartley stood there gasping while she swung away. He made as if to race after her, but a wise instinct, or hunch, restrained him. Nothing he could say to her as she swept along that wide, new road would mean what he must do now.

WHEN he arrived at the siding and had loaded the cattle he turned his horse over to Bill Asquin to take back to the outfit while he joined a cowboy in the train caboose to ride to town. He went into Piebald, the Metropolis of a great and wonderful land where they had a book store and everything. He stood, smelling strongly of live beef, dusty and withal a bit handsome, his glance roving over about two thousand popular reprints, a large number of black backed notebooks and hymnals, Bibles and classics and juveniles in loud colors. A fine, smiling, rather dapper man in his shirt sleeves came and asked:

"Just ride in?"

"Yes, suh," Dartley nodded, looking at the storekeeper with such a sizing up as the man had grown accustomed to since he left the farm belt in Missouri.

"Want some reading matter?" he asked, smiling. "There's forty-three different kinds of magazines."

"We've subscribed for a lot of them," Dartley replied and glanced along the lines, all like fallen dominoes in color.

"I've some mighty fine reading. Just in," the dealer remarked, suddenly divining something of the visitor's predicament. "It's a library, you might say. I'm sure you'll find in it a book or two you'll find mighty—uh—profitable."

"That's exactly what I want," Dartley exclaimed. "Profitable books. Business books of—of culture."

Dartley stood before a stack of shelves set in the wall. There were probably eight hundred volumes in the set, no two alike. He noted where several volumes had been taken out, leaving dark slits at which the small red volumes tipped over against each other.

"I'll take two of them," he said, turning to the bookman.

"Two?" the man puzzled, glancing along the shelves.

"Yes, suh. I want one sent to the Spark sheepfold—Miss June Spark's the name. Ship the other one to me—Put Dartley, Bar Question ranch, Eagle Feather, out on this same railroad."

"Yes. Of course. But which ones?"

"Why, the whole herd. Two bunches——"

"You mean the set—two sets. The libraries *complete?*"

"Yessuh. The whole caboodle," Dartley nodded. "How much'll they come to?"

He drew from a pocket a small leather backed checkbook.

"Why, certainly! Yes, sir!" The book dealer reached around in kind of a daze for order blanks. "I—the names and addresses again, please, so as to be sure."

"Miss June Sparks, Spark sheepfold, Eagle Feather. And Put Dartley, Bar Question ranch, Eagle Feather."

"Right out on the T. P. Railroad?"

"Yes, sir. Right up the line, suh."

"Yes, *sir!*" the merchant assured him. It wasn't every day that a dusty cowboy came in and ordered about sixteen hundred books at a whack, one set for his girl, presumably, and one for himself. And when the bookman looked at the check, with its ink run a bit in dissolved alkali, and a fountain pen blot, erased by a thumb, he did not have to be told that it was worth many pounds of gold, or a tall stack of currency, in small denominations.

"Anything else today?" he inquired.

"Why—I wonder do bookcases come with them."

"Sure. We can arrange that."

"Mine better come right in, soon's you can. The other—uh—if you could run it up along toward Christmas——"

"It'll take about till Christmas to bring them out from New York. I'll have the two sets come by express, so as to be sure, though."

"That's fine, suh. Thank you." The youth extended his hand and the two shook with firm, cordial grasp. Then the book buyer ambled on his way while the dealer stared at the check as though his second thought was to bite it, to see if it was genuine. Yet, without waiting for the check to be verified through the bank, he mailed out orders that night for the shipment from the publishers.

PUT DARTLEY wandered around town, figuring. He was doubtful if, after all, he hadn't been an idiot. Probably June Spark had all those books. They seemed to include about all the printed literature in the world, come to think about it. Having squandered a good many hundred dollars, Dartley hesitated to go into a café to eat something which would cost sixty cents or so. Then he decided he might as well see it through, and bought a dollar and forty cents' worth of grub and tipped the waitress two bits.

"Anyhow, she won't know where those things came from," he grinned to himself. "That'll let me out all right. And I need a lot of turning loose."

The girl who waited on him brought a newspaper. The large headlines were enthusiastic about politics, so Dartley began looking at less blatant information. His glance struck a column of small print.

RUDABON KILLS TWO MORE MEN

Bert Rudabon was again attacked last night in the 'Pache Hall, by two strangers this time. The circumstances were similar to those three weeks ago when Rudabon took a second shot and got the fellow known as Arkey Melstruck. The two bushwhacked him as he passed Cactus Alley, but made the mistake of missing. Rudabon killed them both. Rudabon has no idea why he was attacked, nor could he recognize the men his heart-shots killed. He is 18 years old.

The news item brought Dartley to a pause.

"He's shooting them young," the ranch youth thought to himself. "He's passing eighteen. Don't know why they waylaid him? Huh!"

"You know that man?" the girl interposed, for Dartley unconsciously had whispered his comment.

"I knew a boy of that name," Dartley replied. "Mayn't be the same one."

"I think he is, though," the girl said. "He's just a boy. When he's in Piebald sometimes he eats here."

"What's he doing for a living?"

"Why he's on the road. Gambles some, anyhow. He just goes up and down——"

"He'll go once too often, this looks like," Dartley indicated the paper.

"Well, pardner," the girl drawled, "he's living. He's good comp'ny. He dances swell, too. Everybody likes him!"

"So I was noticing. They waylay him just so's to let him practice on them!" Dartley jeered.

"What a funny way of saying it!" the girl laughed. "Well, good night. It's seven o'clock, an' I want to catch the first movie show."

"I'll help hold it down," Dartley said lightly, and on the instant she took him to his word.

"That's what I wanted you to say!" she assured him. "I'll hang up my insignia of servitude——"

She was gone perhaps six minutes and then returned, a right comely young woman, ready for amusement.

"Excuse me," he greeted her, as they started along the stool counter. "What was that you were hanging up?"

"My insignia of servitude?" she repeated. "My apron, bonnet and gauntlets. The rest of what I wear is my own . . . There's the theater. We're on time!"

"That's a curious line of talk," he kept to his text.

"What's it to you?" she inquired pertly.

"I'm interested in education, tha's all," he answered.

"Well, I'm not!" she laughed. "I used to be a school teacher, but I came West in good health and a willing worker."

"And you know a killer!" he added.

"I don't know you," she remarked, softly.

"I'm just a fellow Rudabon left right plumb behind," he explained grimly. "More'n that don't matter at all in this town."

"All right. Let's watch the show!" she chuckled, snuggling back in a big loge seat. "They say this show's rich!"

CHAPTER III

MAKING A BADMAN

BERT RUDABON had appeared down on the Border, odd-jobbing in the boylike way, setting up pins in the bowling alleys, serving as bellhop in hotels, going after a time into Mingo Jack's pool room at Cut Fence, where he learned a-plenty, polishing off his education as an undergraduate in the school of experience. His hands were long, his fingers supple, his muscles flexible, fast and sure. He was soon doing tricks even old-timers would have hesitated to try; yet getting away with them, for he was an artist in distracting the attention of victims around the tables where he was the house man, dealing.

Sometimes he would knock off, go over to the piano and play tunes for the steppers in Mingo Jack's No Line Dance Hall. It was after a night of dancing, on the way home, that Rudabon went into his first "difficulty." Lightfoot Lura Ledyar had asked him to take her home because she was afraid of a burly, flat faced stranger who had followed her around all the evening.

The youth promptly and gladly said he would "see her through," and went to Sandstorm Watson to borrow a pistol. Watson loaned him a .38 Colt's automatic, showed him how to pull down the safety with his thumb as he pulled the weapon from his outside coat pocket, where it rested in a fine, slick holster made especially for a fast draw out of a pocket.

Lura and Bert essayed to slide out of the dance hall to escape the girl's teaser, but the fellow had suspected something of the kind and saw the two going up the alley. He circled and intercepted them uptown where he charged down on the two, only to see a policeman just around the corner. He said nothing, but he had established a witness, for the cop saw him. Out at the girl's boarding house as the two talked a moment, the jealous man appeared again and came around the driveway with his heavy revolver in hand. Bert threw the girl from him, so that she fell in a bed of withered flowers, while he shot it out with the maddened suitor.

Bert was creased over one shoulder but he put four slugs of jacketed lead into his assailant, who died two hours later, refusing to tell his name or believe that he was passing in his checks. He was known as Ringman, but he was a stranger who was spending money pretty fast over the tables, grub and game. He had enough left to get himself buried in a private graveyard and have a plain marker set up at the head of his resting place. The stone was a rough one, with one polished surface, at the top of which was a wheel with broken spokes and felloe, the inscription *Ringman* and *Died Suddenly, 1919.*

Bert Rudabon had something to do with the burial and stone. He had suggested that as the proper disposal of the man's three hundred dollars. The youth used to walk out to the cemetery on a Sunday afternoon and, accompanied by a party of girls and men, they would pass by the grave of the victim, Bert staring at it abstractedly, his face smiling but an uneasy squinting in his eyes. More experienced men watched him covertly, and one, who had sat opposite the youth to help him learn professionally to play cards, presently felt the attention of the boy. This was Dan Wilsey. Bert had been for a time grateful for the older man's friendliness, but when Dan objected to the boy going quite so far in his playing for the house, warning him he would sure be caught and probably killed, Bert snarled:

"I can take care of myself, Dan. Don't forget that! You mind your own business!"

Dan drew his time immediately. Frankly, he told Mingo Jack that he knew Rudabon had it in for him now, and the best thing to do was for Dan to go over to Mexicali or Juarez. Somewhere else to avoid trouble.

"You'll want to watch the kid," Dan remarked.

"Yeh!" Mingo Jack nodded. "He's growin' his horns fast now."

A year went by, however, before Rudabon went against it again. This time he was in the 'Pache Hall, where he had become floor manager and dance caller. He sang the quadrille changes and sometimes led the way through difficult figures. The 'Pache Hall was a quite respectable and popular floor, with no objectionable features on the side. At the same time, it was an adventure for tourists or high school children or nice people to go there for a few hours stepping to good music.

One night, a sleek and forward stranger put in his appearance. He pressed his attentions on those he decided he wanted to know, and when he was rebuffed for his impudence, he let it be known that he was quite somebody, one who wasn't accustomed to being snubbed.

Miss Rufa Linswell complained to Floor Manager Rudabon that the stranger was annoying her.

"That so? I'll attend to that," Rudabon assured her and crossing to the intruder, said:

"You've be'n riding too skittish a horse, stranger."

"What's it to you?" the man demanded.

"I'm boss, here, so you better pull your freight!"

"I'll see you further first!" the man retorted, snarling, and snatched for his gun, a tiny automatic.

Sandstorm Watson had presented Bert with the .38 automatic and holster which the youth had found so useful against Ringman. Now the boy with swift certainty, as though with one circular sweep of his arm, met the attempt to kill him. The stranger succeeded in raising his ridiculous little weapon, but Rudabon's jacketed projectile hit him, threw him back, and the bullet from the stranger's gun hit the globe of an electric light and not Rudabon.

Rudabon turned from his kill and called across to the girl at the cigar, magazine and candy stand.

"Oh, Big Girl, will you please call Police Headquarters and notify them. Thank you, dearie!"

Just like that. And the crowd thronged around him, congratulating him, kindly words and appreciative, which he welcomed with his flashing smile, deprecatory and pleasant. At the same time, in soft words, he expressed his regret at the sad necessity.

The police, coroner, ambulance and representatives of a local branch of the Carcajou Investigations, Inc. came and did their duties. Chief allowed the gallant floor manager to go on his own recognizance, while the coroner arraigned that Bert should appear at the inquest in due course. Miss Rufa Linswell, daughter of Superintendent Linswell of the great smelters of Cut Fence, could not say enough for her defender. And the legal matters were carefully attended to, making sure that the future could have no unpleasant proceedings should some enemy try to make something of the youngster's affair.

The wretch needed killing, as it developed. Arkey Melstruck was the advance or lookout for a mob of highly organized robbers, holdups, with yeggman sidelines. Melstruck, with a number of aliases, had apparently planned things as regards the Refiners and Smelters Bank, for in his luggage were found photographs, diagrams and intimate data about the bank and its personnel. Cryptic letters and numerals were supposed to give other information, but these remained beyond the decoding powers of the authorities who examined them. No claimant or relatives appearing, Arkey Melstruck was interred beside the grave of the unknown, Ringman. This was because there was plenty of room in that plot, and because Rudabon assented to it. A board was put at the head, painted with name and date of death. The following Sunday Bert Rudabon was seen out there in the cemetery alone, staring at the graves of his dead.

Of course, he was square with the police, with the grand jury, with everyone—except, possibly, friends of the victims. At the same time, the youthful killer had the two on his mind. Generally his eyes were squinting, not so wide open as they formerly had been. Sometimes they opened to their full extent, displaying the white all around the bright blue iris. And that staring look was the more unpleasant because of the smile which always accompanied it.

IN JUST two weeks, when the second killing had been laid away in the newspaper files, though still good talk when strangers looked into the 'Pache Hall, two newcomers arrived in Cut Fence who went to the dance hall and ate a heavy beefsteak dinner as the day waned into night. They talked with one of the waitresses at length, inquiring about who was who. And she indicated Bert Rudabon, who came in to eat before going into the dance hall for his work as floor manager. He turned and greeted her, nodding and smiling. For a moment his eyes glanced at the two restaurant patrons and then turned away quickly. A few minutes later he left a booth and once more swept the two with his odd, quick stare—smiling.

"Say, Welch," he addressed the owner of the place as man to man, "theh's two hombres in the restaurant eating. I don't like their looks. Number Nine was waiting on them. If you don't mind, wish you'd find out for me what they've been wanting to know."

"Sure thing, Bert!" Welch remarked, and going into the kitchen sought the information the floor manager desired. A little later he returned and taking the floor manager to one side, said:

"They've asked about all of us—me, you, the clerk, some of the girls and the cook. Maria was wondering herself what they were up to. They passed her a dollar tip, too. Plenty of money. Flashed a wad at the register."

"Thank you, Welch."

"What's the idea, Bert? What's on your mind?" Welch asked, quickly.

"Oh, nothing!" The boy turned away on his heel, and going to the orchestra, took up a banjo and began to pick, in the gay way he had, ribald music which would lift the soles or heels of any listener.

The two strangers left the restaurant, going down the street toward the Border. They went into a drug store and drank at the soda fountain, bought a box of candied ginger and munching these strolled along, watched by one of the 'Pache Hall restaurant bus boys and utility youths. Then they went into a motion picture show, whereupon the trailer returned to Welch with the information.

Uneasily, Welch went down the street to the brightly illuminated Line Theater. Standing in the background he presently located the two in one of the heavily cushioned loge seats. He went and sat down behind them, hoping to listen in on their talk. He was disappointed. They had only praise for the excellence of the players in a crook melodrama. Welch left in half an hour, returning to his business, for it was likely to need attention.

Welch had nearly forgotten the two strangers in the work he had to do, looking after accounts and being sociable, when he saw one of the girls go to Rudabon and whisper. The floor manager nodded, smiled and handed her a silver dollar. That, Welch thought, was unnecessary—extraordinary; but he reckoned it wasn't a matter of his.

A little later, Welch saw a newsboy swiftly thread his way through a crowd dancing a popular tango, and Rudabon stooped to listen to what this lad had to say. The proprietor did not exactly like the matter. He knew that Rudabon was intensely alert, watchful in all directions and cougarlike in his circling about, sometimes with the partner of a moment, and again stepping around for a measure or figure or two, alone. Out of his past, considerable experience Welch knew how fickle Fortune can be with a dance hall proprietor. He had seen one of his own most profitable enterprises suddenly ruined by a trivial row. He was nervous, now, on account of his floor manager's late killing, which happily had improved rather than injured the status of the 'Pache Hall. At the same time Welch had no illusions in the matter.

Welch turned to obtain a cigar at the counter, where he was met by a loquacious spender who wanted attention. Ten minutes elapsed before Welch could escape by sicking a tall, Spanishly arrayed girl onto the fellow. A glance across the floor did not reveal Rudabon as present. A keener, more particular search made it sure that the manager had slipped away. Welch circled the hall, and pulling impatiently away from a buttonholer, he went into the restaurant kitchen. Rudabon had gone through there just a minute before—perhaps five minutes, though. Welch followed.

Rudabon had taken advantage of the kitchen side door through which sometimes it was expedient for people to make their exit from the establishment. Often wives of gamblers, bartenders and other respectables fled to leave obnoxious suitors astray, using that obscure door. Welch slipped through and, glancing out in front through the narrow passage, turned and went to the delivery alley in the rear. He paused a moment to get the bright lights out of his eyes.

Then he peered cautiously around the corner and on the instant discovered two men, the pair he had followed to the theater, silhouetted against a deeper shadow beyond them up the alley. Staring, he could presently make out that one had a short, shoulder butt weapon—a shotgun, probably. He was whispering with his companion, but too far for Welch to hear. He waited patiently, his own automatic in his hand.

"The sons of guns!" the observer thought to himself. "So that's their game, eh? Shoot the kid in *my* place, eh?"

Welch hesitated. He knew, now, that Rudabon had been alert, was aware of something wrong and that he had enlisted helpers in keeping track of the two who had attracted his alert suspicion. The two were bad, but not of the Cut Fence and Border kind of badmen. They were undersized, perfumed, chalky faced little wretches, treacherous and yet hateful in memory of one of their own. They had surely come to Cut Fence to teach people not to make trouble for *them*.

Suddenly, Welch became conscious of another shade beyond the two skulkers. He felt, almost rather than saw, a change of form or gloom. Someone else had appeared on the Stygian scene of the back alley of dance halls, pool rooms and blind tigers. An alley vagrant cat could not have been more sneaking, or furtive, as the shadow drew toward the men who were armed, discussing something.

"Howdy!" the chilled voice of Bert Rudabon barked at the two, who literally jumped, turning to confront the one who had hailed them.

They looked into the blinding cone of a flashlight beam which flickered on and off their faces. The two threw up their weapons, fired, and then Rudabon pulled twice with his own automatic. From the flashes, Welch, a close observer, instantly realized what the floor manager had done. Holding the flash out at arm's length with his left hand, Rudabon had drawn the shots away from himself. Then deliberately he drove home two .38 caliber jacketed slugs, each one billeting in a victim. Both men fell.

Welch gulped, not so much at witnessing the killings as at the cold implacability of the youth who had so nicely, and with such deliberate approximation of safety, met the issue of self-defense, alibi—and bloodlust. Welch drew back, circled and provided his own alibi by dropping into a coffee counter just around the corner. The waiter remarked;

"Thought I heard a coupla shots just now, Mr. Welch."

"Shots? I thought I heard a tire blow out."

"Maybe it was an echo, at that. Lots o' echoes around this old town."

WELCH neither hurried nor procrastinated with his toasted ham sandwich and a cup of coffee. He was strolling along the street when City Marshal Haveroy overtook him.

"Howdy, Welch. Somebody telephoned they'd heard shooting. Know anything about it?"

"Coffee Joe was saying he heard some shooting. I thought it was a tire blow out, myself. Couldn't tell which direction, though, account of the alleys and buildings."

"That's right," the officer assented. "Wasn't in the street here. There'd be a crowd around, probably. They're looking around, though."

Men had come out of pool rooms and other places to stand along the curb or on the sidewalks, looking up and down, ready to see anything or jump, if anything happened. They spoke in low voices and when they recognized Haveroy put the question to him.

"I'm looking myse'f," he answered. "Where was it?"

Opinions differed on that point. Two uniformed motorcycle cops rode up and talked with Welch, Haveroy and bystanders. It was sure enough a shooting, all agreed—a loud whang and then three pops, sharp crackling fire. As they stood there Welch saw Bert Rudabon come out of the dance hall front door and look up and down the street. The glint of the motorcycles caught his eyes from across the newly paved concrete street.

Walking with quick, characteristic little swagger, but his wide brimmed hat on almost perfectly straight, Rudabon came quickly to the group of three officers, apparently not noticing Welch or the others gathered around.

"Mr. Haveroy—Marshal!" he addressed the senior officer. "I was over in the alley a while ago, and two men made a jump for me, shooting. Course I let go, soon's I could pull. I ran into the 'Pache Hall, where I've been working—floor manager you know—took off my clericals and was just going down to headquarters after you. Here's my gun. I shot twice. Look out, she's loaded; but I set the safety."

"Where was that?" Haveroy asked.

"Back in the alley. I was over in Ladino John's, swallowing a cup of coffee, while they were circling a set on the floor. Coming through the alley they jumped at me, shooting."

"Let's go look," the city marshal suggested, and the three officers followed Rudabon and twelve or fifteen curious bystanders followed Welch. They went through a three-foot passageway beside the dance hall into the alley.

"Got a flashlight, somebody?" Rudabon inquired, and the police switched on their gleams. Rudabon dropped back into the shadows, continuing, "I'd rather be out of the glow—account of if they're still waylaying me."

They picked out the dark figures lying where they had fallen. One had an automatic .45, the other a shotgun with the 12 gauge barrel cut off with a hacksaw to fifteen inches, nearly flush with the end of the short magazine. They had collapsed on their knees, and one was huddled down like a rabbit, his face in the dirt, instantly killed. The other had sprawled and kicked about a little, straightening out one leg.

"Dead!" Haveroy said, having felt against the arteries near the ear lobes. "Better get the coroner, boys!"

One of the motorcycle cops ran out to his machine and roared swiftly down the street to the office of Dr. Swanson, the coroner. He could go faster than he could hook up by telephone. He was back with the coroner in five minutes. A good many people were milling in the alley by that time, held back by Welch, Haveroy and the other motorcycle men. Two deputy sheriffs arrived in a moment. The coroner arrived, too, and looked over the scene.

"What happened, Rudabon?" he asked, sharply.

Rudabon told how he came from Ladino John's after taking a cup of coffee, ran into the two men who came shooting.

"Course, I let go, then," Rudabon said.

"Course, *you* would!" the coroner nodded with just the slightest of emphasis, which Welch caught and understood. "Well, there's your tracks coming through the dust . . . Go check up at Ladino John's, Marshal!"

Rudabon stiffened, smiling, gazing at the coroner who did not seem to notice him. Confirmation of the killer's story was necessary, of course, but there was a tang in the coroner's voice which was given point by his bearing. Welch dropped back into his dance hall, now left to the crowd who would rather dance than stand around watching a murder spectacle.

Rudabon did not return to the 'Pache Hall. He wasn't arrested, but he had a motorcycle cop for company over to the undertakers and went down to headquarters where the city attorney came with a stenographer to take down his story. The two men were strangers. No one recognized either of them. They were both perfumed, undersized and lying on their backs; their expressions were, even in death, hard and malignant, one flat faced, the other—like Arkey Melstruck—sharp faced and either rat or weasel in expression, a little of both.

"You keep around till the inquest," Dr. Swanson told Rudabon curtly. "You can go home, now."

Rudabon glanced around. He saw only the set, unsmiling faces of the several police officers, the city attorney, De Foster, busy making notes from the statements of the officers. Rudabon smiled, but his eyes narrowed. The blue shone like pale sapphires, sparkling. He resented the short treatment but knew better than to say anything. He left with his shoulders humped up and he appeared early on the street in the morning, buying the Cut Fence *Nippers*, to read the story of his adventure. The newspaper printed less than half a column, but set it in heavy type.

RUDABON KILLS TWO MORE

So the caption read, and that was the tone of the news. The story ended:

> . . . Apparently Rudabon's story holds together, for Ladino John said he ran in, as he claims, for a cup of coffee, in a hurry, as he had to be back to organize a new dance set.

Autopsies added nothing to the information, except that each bullet had gone through the heart of its victim. The inquest would follow the next day.

THAT night Rudabon came onto the 'Pache Hall floor as usual. The music struck up lively strains, but though it was Wednesday night, and crowds were usually on hand, only a few couples swung out to circle around the floor. There was no enthusiasm, no ginger in the gaiety. In vain Rudabon called for livelier music and sought, by example, to start the crowd. Welch, in the shadowy background under the balcony, watched the lack of patronage with dour feelings.

The inquest on the following day formally took the testimony of the killer, the officers and surgeons who had performed the autopsy. Welch was put on the stand and he told of coming down from the coffee shop after the waiter had spoken about hearing shots. Then the city marshal had come along, and while they were talking with the motorcycle cops, Rudabon had come over with his story.

"Looks like homicide—two to one—in self-defense," Coroner Swanson observed, shortly, when the city attorney remarked that all the facts seemed to be in.

Just then a telegraph messenger came in with a telegram for the city marshal. He read it aloud:

> FINGER PRINTS OF ARKEY MELSTRUC
> ARE THOSE OF LUKE CARBONE ALIAS PAU
> ALGER HOLDUP AND BURGLAR STOP B
> LONGS TO THE SUNDAY NIGHT BAND O
> YEGGS PAL OF FLAT FACE PINDELL AN
> DAGO MAURICE INGLOW STOP PRISO
> RECORDS CRIMES AS LISTED IN NATIONA
> ARCHIVES FOLLOW BY MAIL STOP WATC
> FOR PINDELL AND INGLOW DESCRIBED I
> YOUR GALLERY NUMBERS 9AB13 AN
> 10AB28 STOP NOW WANTED STOP R
> WARDS STOP HOLD WHEN CAPTURED

Sure enough, when the city marsh brought the rogues gallery pictures an records, the two dead men were instantl recognized.

"What's that?" Rudabon exclaimed "Rewards on those birds? Then I—

"You're lucky we don't pin a murd charge on you," Coroner Swanson turne to him, sharply. "You've killed four me now. The Government is not in the hab of paying men for habitual homicide."

Rudabon flared, starting up from h seat. On the instant, the city marsh motorcycle cops and a deputy sheri covered him with their revolvers. He stood with his hands lifted out, palms down, glancing with narrowed eyelids around at that coldly efficient array of menacing firearms. Then he sat down, staring at the floor beyond his crossed ankles. He had killed some right bad actors. He was probably technically entitled to an allowance for having stopped criminals on whose heads were prices. At the same time none of the men in authority had given him one word of congratulation. He *was* lucky. Four men killed and not a trial for murder!

He walked with Welch, after the dismissal of the coroner's jury, which grudgingly brought in a verdict of justifiable homicide, in self-defense. They went to lunch together, and then to the 'Pache Hall. There the city marshal came and said to Rudabon:

"Young man, we're burying those two men in your private boot hill, y'understand? Same time, the lot is full up now. There's kind of a feeling you've about reached the limit of your usefulness here in Cut Fence."

"You mean to tell me—" Rudabon snarled, yet his lips smiling. But on the instant, as he surged clear of the counter against which he was leaning, he heard two guns click behind him. When he looked over his shoulder he saw a motorcycle cop and a deputy sheriff with their guns leveled, ready.

"It's your move, boy," the city marshal declared. "Better vacate before six o'clock tonight."

"All right, if that's the way you feel about it," Rudabon answered.

CHAPTER IV

THINNING HERDS AND FLOCKS

IN THE Blizzard Basin country, ranchers, sheepmen, cowboys and shepherds were sensitive to conditions. They watched the herds and flocks closer than they knew, and uneasiness that something was wrong caused them all to look around them partly suspicious, partly wondering, but uncertain as to what actually was bothering them. With tens of thousands of cattle, sheep, hundreds of horses, a certain drain was sure—the old ten per cent formula.

Over in the sheep country the Spark bands worked over the pastures and ran into the usual formidable array of storms, cold, wet, or dust. The result of the bad weather was sometimes tangible; flocks scattered and sheep curled up dead where the drifted snow had filled over the low brush into which the beasts had drifted to be out of the wind.

In the cattle country when a cold, sleety norther came down the line, the beasts turned their tails and shambled, stumbling along. They went over bluffs, they soused into water and quicksand, they edged along the foot of cliffs and spread down over the wide basin until at last they came to some barrier like a pen where they stopped.

When, in their folly, humans divided up the land, spreading fences across the country, paying attention to the compass only as foolish political lines were drawn by surveyors who knew merely that the North Star is north, and didn't give a whoop if it was cold in the wind or not, nobody figured on the sleets, blizzards, sand storms. Shrewd and grasping men seized the waterholes, fenced them off and claimed them. A quarter section would hold the grazing of fifty or a hundred square miles. A band of cows could graze out twelve or twenty-four hours and then work back to the water for a drink, but not if the water was surrounded by a bull proof fence. And these same cunning men would run drift fences athwart the course of the north wind, and presently wondered at the sour luck which piled their beef dead against the impenetrable barbed wire.

Then there were locos, foxtails, mysterious agencies of death which stretched the domestic creatures in poison misery. Or else it was disease which wasted plump feeders into gaunt specters. Year after year the anxiety of the cattlemen to get their beasts marked indelibly, and beyond the change of forgeries, led them to stamping with hot branding irons on the young skins of calves—only to learn after inestimable losses that the wounds thus opened in the skins were the opportunity of screw worm flies who took more toll than the human thieves.

Yet taking all these casualties into account, things avoidable but not worth fighting against, according to some of the notions of the day, the now cut-up and defined outfits of sheep and cattle, hemmed in at last pretty well by agreements and sundry dividing lines like streams and mountain ranges, there remained a drain or drains which could not be traced. Cattle, grazing in small bunches up sundry draws and out from certain limited supplies of water, thinned inexplicably.

Cowboys riding line would see every trip or two some certain steer with a Brahma hump, or a black tail end, or a side twist to the head; and then that beast would vanish. Failure to see the familiar individual two or three times would annoy the line rider. He had his suspicions, but he couldn't say anything—not being sure—for fear of making matters worse.

Then there were round-ups, dragging down certain pastures and throwing in all the cows with calves, or taking out the three year olds, or making up cars of fancy shippers for feeding or breeding up. There ought to have been one hundred and fifty or three hundred or five hundred over a given area. Perhaps the herd would come in shy, as under a hundred or two hundred and forty or only three hundred and eighty.

Over in the sheep country conditions were somewhat similar—even if cowmen couldn't imagine sheep in any smallest particular resembling cattle. Flocks were scattered, and then when they were brought together again the band would be shy just to look at it. Shepherds would count the flocks, one, two, three, running them through a gap. There would be a discrepancy of perhaps fifty, a hundred, two hundred, or four hundred sheep between a guess before a storm and an actual count after a storm.

It was pretty disgraceful for a sheepman to turn in a thin band, when it was out of a good pasture and only a storm or two of killing size. A sheepman was an individual, a responsible entity, with perhaps fifteen to twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of property in his care; while a cowboy might not have more than eight thousand dollars or so share in perhaps fifty thousand dollars' worth of cattle. And the cowboy was likely enough not given any responsibility at all, the foreman, the superintendent, or a top-hand really riding high and mighty.

So a sheepman with one thousand four hundred sheep instead of one thousand seven hundred—what could he tell his owner? He would be ashamed to say his own dogs, or perhaps the sheepfold dogs were to blame. It would not do. No! A shepherd with too many excuses would better turn dirt farmer and be done with it.

PUT DARTLEY of the Bar Question brand outfit, a superintendent—and a good one—at nineteen, sat at his books in the main outfit, studying them alone. His mother, who owned the ranch, had gone to Washington to visit her sister, whose husband used to be a congressman. There were canceled checks, cash accounts, paid bills for supplies, water pump and other machine records, and lists of cowboys, cooks, tote wagon drivers and wandering odd-jobbers—steadies and transients. Against all the outgoes he had stacked the sale of beef in all the varied forms, from culls shipped impatiently to canners, to the calves being bought out yonder by men who were breeding up their own herds.

Dartley was young, enthusiastic, optimistic as regards cows. He hunted through his papers, and counted in all the cattle that he could remember having heard any foreman or cowboy mention. He made all the allowances feasible for the common casualties of a cattle ranch's herds. His conscience troubled him when he essayed to write his mother that he was shy, somewhere, five hundred head. He could make the figures show five hundred lost beeves. He knew instinctively that he was out at least seven hundred and fifty head, and he had the uneasy feeling that he had been done out of perhaps a thousand head.

Dartley sat back, and in his mind looked in all directions out of the big outfit. He was in a rather plain office, with steer horn ornaments, a nice fireplace, spurs, firearms, a typewriter and a desk which was ordinarily rather neatly cleared but now was stacked with dirty checks, dusty foreman's notebooks, letters in clips, and bills. And as he puzzled about his mystery, he smiled as he saw the bill for two libraries, complete, marked "PAID." One of these stood in the corner of his own room. He could see from his east window, on some dark, limpid nights, a light so far away that it looked to be less than a star of the third magnitude. But in his thoughts the moon was not proportionately brighter in the skies than that gleam. That was the Spark sheepfold, beyond the Lingual Creek bottoms.

He had met June Spark four or fiv

times since that day when he shipped her eight hundred volumes of selected classics. That had been nearly two years previous. She hadn't mentioned the books till the month before, when he was down at Piebald, when they were both buying Christmas presents to be handed around among the hired men and retainers of their respective outfits.

That had been a busy five days for the two, who shirked no responsibility in their estate affairs. They had seen a good deal of each other, consulted on the tastes of men, women and children, rested by going to motion pictures together; and yet were suitably offish in their conversation and bearings. This is as sheep and cow folks should meet during their momentary truces, their short periods of mutual respect.

"You know," June remarked once, "I had the funniest experience two years ago! Somebody shipped me a whole library, eight hundred volumes of books. And they were the most beautiful in the world! Lots and lots of them I'd been going to read, but never really got around to buy. Course, I thought it was dad, or my Uncle John, or somebody like that. I didn't know, though. And from that day to this I've never known where they came from. I let it go asking till I'd fished through the whole school of my relatives. Then I went to the express office. Then I asked a big book jobber down in K. C., and they wrote back it was a Christmas shipment, but fire had caught in their files and burned up their records, covering that period. I've puzzled my head off . . . I never look at those books I don't wonder."

"That was queer, wasn't it?" Dartley remarked. "I suppose you're going to college, now?"

"Yes. But I'm cutting for two weeks through the Thanksgiving vacation, and that lets me into this Christmas buying . . . I just love it, really!"

"I can stand it," Put said. "I've been keeping tabs on the outfit, noticing their preferences. I've had some of the foremen help me out, too. Drifters come through, you know, who just stay through the winter, perhaps, and we stack up a few things extra, by guess and by gum, so if a stroller comes by, having a family with him in his wagon, we can look after him, and the youngsters."

"I didn't suppose a cow outfit had any sentiment whatever!" she declared, with wide eyes showing mock surprise.

"They haven't. Not a bit," he assured her. "It's good business, that's all. The boys who go wandering on let the world know in their gossiping that the Bar Question takes a human interest in everybody all around——"

"Well, sheep people are naturally mild and gentle; kindly . . ." she remarked thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes!" he assured her, adding, "They have to be——"

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded tartly.

"Forgiving and so on," he continued what she had been saying.

She rolled her eyes at him, a puzzled frown on her brows.

"You saved—I don't know what—by that implied appeal to a sheepfold's natural spirit!"

"I know," he nodded.

"You're not going to college?" she demanded suddenly.

"No."

"Two years, or so, ago you were hurt so badly by rude schoolboy brutalities that you soured against formal education. Now you've changed. You don't seem to mind—teasing."

"Well, I've had to say 'Yes' and 'No' to a lot of men, a few women, handling the Bar Question for my mother. I suppose I've bucked up——"

"Hardened?" she suggested.

"I reckon," he admitted.

"You're easier on the nerves," she smiled. "You're not so difficult to talk with."

"I'd like to be friendly, popular—" he said.

"It's a gift—popularity especially," she went on gravely. "I've always been sorry about the way those mean scoundrels, Rudabon and the rest, bothered you. It made you unhappy—hurt. That's why you quit going to school, wasn't it?"

"Why—I expect," he admitted.

"Look what you are. Look what has happened to Rudabon!"

"Happened to him? I hadn't heard?"

"He's killed two more men, down at Cut Fence. That makes four."

Dartley made no comment, though his silence as he gazed away was expressive.

"There was talk around you caught the gang raiding your 'dobe cabin somehow, and cleaned them up?" she questioned.

"They messed things. I didn't do anything about it . . . I've forgot what happened——"

"I remember. They said you found a watch or something belonging to one of the boys and you gave it back——"

"Yes. Something like that. I was through though. Pulled my freight. If all those scoundrels can do in school—the smart ones—is high-horse among the poor devils like me with no special talents and just a wish to be halfway decent in our minds . . . Well, I had to do one of two things. I had to go back on the ranch or drop a rope on them, one by one, and drag them down the road."

"Gracious!"

"I didn't mean to tell you—what I was figuring—" he caught his breath, for he had spoken out of his heart.

"I've been through some of it." She shook her head. "Hazing . . . The girls don't do it the same as boys. They have their cruelties, though. I 'low I was kinda funny, myself. Afterwards, three or four learned about our sheep range. It sounded romantic . . . But they'll never see ours. I'm going to have some of the real people with us next summer. I wonder . . . Would you help me entertain them? You see, there aren't many who could, like you."

"Why, Miss Spark—" he caught his breath. "Course!— But I—as you know I've—I've neglected my education!"

"I'll let you know when I need you," she laughed.

He was worrying about as much over the passing days which brought him nearer to the coming summer as he was about his missing cattle. He could just fairly see himself figuring as a rancher, a cowman, one of those awfully interesting Westerners who would be inspected by a flock—or whatever a bunch of girls is called.

PUT accompanied June Spark to the train, saw her on her way to the sheep range with her load of Christmas things. Then he went back downtown and found it deserted, lonely, kind of raw and chilly. He had two more days of his own, having agreed to meet one of the Stock Association officials to talk over closer tabs on the cattle raising industry. He had also some maverick things to round up, getting them done. And he went around to that same little café where he had eaten on that evening when he ordered the libraries for June Spark and himself.

As he entered he saw, sitting behind the cash register, the same girl he had taken to the theater in his loneliness. She looked at him with but a glance, now. He went on to sit on a stool, looking over the menu on the wall placards.

"I'll start with beef bone soup," he told a girl who came for his order. "I want to think about the rest of it."

Then he took a double set of lamb chops. He figured he would like young sheep. He never had been particular as to mutton stuff. But, somehow, now, he wanted just those particular chops, with mashed potatoes and green peas. He was making good headway, too, when a shapely arm at the cash register stretched across the counter, greeting him, followed by a voice.

"Howdy, Dartley! Wondered if ever you'd come back."

"Thought you'd forgotten me!" he exclaimed.

"No." She shook her head. "You treated me too well. I didn't place you the first look, though. I own this place now. I kinda blame you for my settling down, steady, you know. Funny the way things break! Wish you'd let me take you to the show tonight. It's good!"

He looked at her, the waitress of two years previous, whose name he did not know but who had been friendly.

"It'd be all right, wouldn't it?" she asked. "My intentions are sure plumb honorable!"

"Yes, indeed!" He nodded, as he felt the envious glances of other patrons. "I was just wondering—if I should let you take me, or claim the privilege——"

"If you won't go with me, we don't go," she declared.

"What you want'll have to stand, then!" He smiled.

Accordingly they went to the show, a lively one which told of desperadoes, sheriffs, fighting and racing, thieving and villainies.

"There's a good one coming through here now," the café proprietress remarked. "He's Bert Rudabon. Killed three-four down Cut Fence country."

"What's he doing?" Dartley inquired.

"Spending money," she laughed. "Dollar tips for the girls. When he's in town he hangs out down at the Chaparral . . .

Dances clever and you'd ought to hear his music! Picks a banjo, plays a fiddle, blows a French horn——"

"Right popular, I expect?"

"With the ladies—yes!" she laughed. "But, of course, these killers . . . Well, men are 'fraid of them. He's around town tonight. Want to go dance? My treat?"

"I'd rather not." Dartley shook his head, adding, "I'm afraid of this Rudabon."

"I don't believe it!"

"Well, I am," he insisted, and she did not urge him further. She still did not believe him. But did not care to ask what he really meant.

And now, harking back to the wise café girl, Dartley wondered if he had said too much—or not enough. Anyhow, he never wanted to see Bert Rudabon again.

CHAPTER V

THE DEAD SHEPHERD

NATHAN LUSTROLE, manager of the Spark bands of sheep, rode out with a wagon of supplies to leave in the winter lowland pastures for the tenders. He carried something extra, in the way of a gift, for each of the lonely men and for the dog or two who were the companions of the highly paid and expert shepherds.

Just to have Nathan come with a wagon driver was quite an event, a break of two or three weeks or, some other times, a month. One shepherd would come a long way to meet the supplies, but another would draw away in embarrassment and perhaps would only show himself at the top of a ridge or out in the junipers. Just so Lustrole would know it was all right; that Jean, or Michael, or whoever it might be was all right.

The band of Lopaz Wisnomore was northermost of the Spark sheep. Apparently the spring had broken. Fresh showers had fallen, the unaccustomed spreads of pasture instantly blossomed.

Manager Lustrole looked ahead as he topped a low roll in the narrows at the head of the winter pastures. There he would find the sheep cared for by Lopaz. He swept the sheltered little basin with his eyes and started as he failed to discern the flock fretting the landscape with its compact grouping during a feeding march. No sheep band was in sight however.

And then the wagon on the two rut trail came to a goat grazing alone—a whiskery patriarch of a goat, with a rope of chin whiskers and horns of jet black. Lustrole remembered that beast, an old fellow who was boon companion of Lopaz. What was Tiptilt doing alone?

There were other scatterings of lonely beasts; ewes with a lamb or two, wethers going alone, rams stalking along in confusion of flocklessness. Catastrophe, disaster had befallen the flock of Lopaz Wisnomore. That was clear enough when the manager had seen a score or two of the flock out there in the pasture.

Lustrole galloped ahead of the wagon. He turned over to where Lopaz would naturally have his two-wheel half-wagon, with its covered hoops and conveniences of a perambulating canvas home. The wagon, down by a good spring, a day's march from the agreed rendezvous, showed that the shepherd had decided to get on his way. But the camp was cold. The bed was thrown open, for a quick leaping forth, surely in the night. Two .30-30 loaded shells indicated business. The manager sat high in his saddle looking in all directions. He saw scatters of sheep but neither man nor dog.

He saw toward the east, down a grade, the natural bedding ground. He rode there, studying the tracks—now two days old—carefully and slowly. The sheep had started from their sleep to head away downgrade toward the eastward. What had started them was not plain, but three hundred yards distant stretched Piute, the dog who worked with Lopaz and was famous for his rare intelligence. Shot dead. The bullet had been painlessly accurate. Lustrole with his knife cut it out the dead beast's body where it had lodged after coming down through from the left side via the heart into the skin under the right shoulder. A .45 caliber bullet!

A horseman had swung down the grade and done this thing. Another dog which Lopaz kept was dead just beyond. Yet there were dog tracks where the flock had gone along. And these dogs had spiraled back and forth at the heels of the panic stricken flock, harrying it along, leaving behind lambs and less agile beasts. The dogs had been encouraged by no less than three horsemen!

Then, where the sheep were turned to the northward, and still bearing east, Lustrole found a horse stretched out—shot dead.

"That was Lopaz!" Lustrole exclaimed. "A moon brand horse, eh? I don't know that brand!"

Saddle and blanket had been taken away with the bridle and reins. The thief had come back for these, probably. Anyhow the stripping was ominous. Lustrole rode high in his saddle, looking around, and sure enough he found Lopaz where he had been running at top speed when a shower of buckshot had cut him down, so that he fell and pitched, rolling headlong on a slope.

With the dogs and shepherd dead, the strays from the flock of sheep were scattered wide. The stealers had at least two days start of any pursuit. Lustrole followed the tracks over a mountain spur and took note of the direction. He could hardly estimate their destination. With three or four days start they could do a lot of scattering and hiding. Taking the fast walking animals, dropping the weaklings behind. Well, half the band was gone—for bad!

Lustrole went to tell the wagon driver to use his dog and bring together as many of the scattered sheep as could be done, while he himself went back to the Basin to send up two good men and dogs to round up what they could of the wide flung flock.

BAD business. Like a raid in the old days, when sheep were warring with cattle for the pastures. But it brought to a head things which had been mysteriously aggravating to the manager and his employers. Sheep had been disappearing, a steady and inexplicable drain on the flocks. Now the raiders had shown their hand. The evidence was plain.

Using dogs of their own, the thieves had been cutting out strays and working along the edges of flocks, sending in the dogs to cut them up and then in the mêlée or confusion running away with small bunches. Shepherds had reported many wolf raids. But in the night they could not tell the difference between coyotes or gray wolves and a pack of raider dogs, operated by men, invisible in the background of rain storm or high winds.

Lopaz had heard the alarm, perhaps, during a high night wind, and dashed forth to do battle—only to be killed. Or it might have been the thieves had come under cover of a fog. The evidence was not plain on this point. But there had been mists that night.

Sheepmen rode their horses and carried their rifles, taciturn men, gentle voiced, with faces untroubled of expression. They rode now, bent on condign punishment for those who broke up flocks, killed dogs and even one of their own men. But they rode in vain. A cloudburst swept the very region where the stolen sheep had traversed. There was no trail left, as though the elements had favored the devils.

A youth, new to lonely responsibility, took the half flock which was all that remained of Lopaz's broken band.

Manager Lustrole warned the shepherds of the Spark bands to watch out. He studied their expressions as he told those men of impassive countenance of the special jeopardies ahead of them.

Association with sheep is not always promoting to one's innocence. Some people like to have sheep companions, for it is then so easy to take advantage of the guileless and unsuspecting. Lustrole could not tell just which of his shepherds might be standing in with the thieves, permitting the cutting out of a certain percentage in bunches of wethers or meat stock.

Lustrole did not swear. There were no wrinkles in his countenance. He was tall, slender, dark of complexion, his eyes like pools of alkali water, iridescent in colors of the skies, blue or fiery with sunsets, or deep and dark with starlike sparklings, as though his moods were the ups and downs of days and nights. Smooth shaven, with his wide brimmed soft felt hat and wearing blue jeans with stripes of tiny stars, also a denim blue jacket and a shirt like bed ticking, striped, he rode with his back straight. And when he walked on the ground he lifted his feet high and still stood straight. So that if a cowboy saw him a mile away he would say:

"Look't him step. That man's *sheep!*"

And no cowboy in the land could begin to compare in gracefulness and poise of walk with the flat heeled shepherds, because, perforce, of the high, sharp heeled boots the cattlemen must wear to hook into the sod when holding a rope against the surge of horse or roped beast.

It was no consolation to the sheep owners and managers that they read in the newspapers that cattlemen were baffled by the shy figures in their spring round-ups, too. The sheepmen could with patient, silent tongues, await their chance for revenge.

But cattlemen are seldom patient. They were talking.

CHAPTER VI

CATTLEMEN AND SHEEPMEN

THE Spring Coil brand was over the divide west from the Bar Question range. Jerry Holbrinn counted his herd by the thousand head, and within a few years he had grudgingly spoiled the looks of his pasture by planting alfalfa as feed insurance during hard spells of snow and drought. He much preferred the unfenced range and the dusty, wearisome toil of round-ups and ownership disputes to the sure-thing divisions under lines drawn by high strands of barbed wire. He rather scorned the Widow Dartley and her boy superintendent, though he envied the high grade of the Bar Question herds.

Long before, when Jerry was young and taking on lands and mavericks he found around loose, he had tried to come over the dividing ridge down into the Dartley domain. He had thrown five hundred head over the divide onto the east slopes, just to get a claim by adverse possession. Old Man Dartley had rounded up the five hundred head and charged Jerry Holbrinn twenty-five cents a head for pasture trespass, an' by golly, he had to pay it to get his cattle back! He never did forget that one hundred and twenty-five dollars.

Careless, extravagant, cocksure, Jerry Holbrinn needed a big jolt before he felt something was wrong. He liked beasts with large horns. He enjoyed having mean horses which his riders had to fight for half an hour or so in the morning. He would take on hard looking hombres for his crew, and when there was a row out in the bunkhouse, he listened to the trouble with complacency.

He was pleased to recall that he had gained his great start when the famous "Long Storm" drifted hundreds of thousands of cattle southward and cornered them in a terrific mixture of brands wherever rivers or bluffs or shelters stopped them, a hundred or so miles down the lee. In one pocket, partly shelter and partly blind valley, Jerry Holbrinn had probably four hundred head when the storm began. He had nine thousand head there when the skies cleared.

People looking for strays never did look up into the unpromising back country occupied by Holbrinn. The route there was upgrade and offside. And the nine thousand head had about seven hundred different brands—just a few head from each one. And Jerry let them go till he was shipping their young stock—all spiral brands, naturally. Among these he shoved in old beasts, strays and natural unearned increment. Brand inspection hadn't interposed a difficult barrier against such a built-up herd, and so the spiral brand leaped from just a cowboy's pet into a full herd with needs of two or three hundred thousand acres for grazing.

Now Holbrinn was old, grizzled, cocky and full of ginger, proud and wealthy. Sheep hadn't cut his acres, to amount to anything. He had Spanish grants, real and forged, to insure him deeds to the lands. He was taxed less, yet he cussed more about Governmental interference than anyone in the whole country.

And now Holbrinn was losing money. He had always sold off the best of his animals, allowing buyers to throw back into his herds the culls and canners. And carelessly, Holbrinn had bred his herds down instead of up. For years the process had continued, till a day came when the old rancher rode alongside his ranch round-up and realized with increasing rumblings of profanity that never in his life had he seen a scrawnier, measlier, mangier herd of beef than these tangle-haired wet-hides. He had seventy culls to thirty feeders or shippers.

Holbrinn started to swear at his own hard luck, gulped and directed his oaths at himself. He was the doddering numbskull of the riproaring, snortin' wild and wooly, he was!

So Holbrinn headed away for town, galloping. He killed a horse, dropping the poor beast dead in front of the telegraph office. No matter! He was in a hurry. He telegraphed thus and so, to the E.M.F. and the 202 and the Gillette Curly Rump

Stock Company, and to the Gulf Coast Brahmas, Inc. And he sent cash in advance—on account of his own reputation—demanding carload lots of top grade bull and heifer breeders with which to turn his own dadblasted, whangdoodled, bone-and-gristle herd into the tenderest, juiciest, sweetest, fancifullest blue ribbon beef ever grown south of Canada and north of Yucatan.

Just so, Jerry Holbrinn changed his practices to suit the new stock raising game. He shipped away thousands of head of skin-and-bone stock, with enormous horns, and cleaned his pastures in the most drastic cut across the bottom that anybody had ever heard about. And he borrowed fifty thousand dollars on top of exhausting all his cash, bringing in heifer stock and a hundred bulls to which even county fair judges would have had trouble to take exception.

Laying his own brand on these newcomers from scattered pastures, Jerry Holbrinn wagged his head and shook his goatee to right or left. When he did a thing, he did it. In three years he'd have a herd as is—he would! And now, with all his pastures looking fine with deep bodied, blooded beef, Jerry would be damned if "acclimatization" wasn't the dingwhangedest word he ever had expected to learn in this vale of woe. His buys had some of them proved fine. Others had sort of humped up their backs, shrank in their paunches and looked like the spring after, before winter had come. He had brought in a lot of the beasts in the spring, for one thing, and branded them pronto. Naturally, he wouldn't think of screw worms. But eggs had been laid in the brand wounds, and naturally there was the devil to pay, therefore.

But that wasn't all. Some of the choicest of the animals just vanished, a lot of the huskiest of the fancy bulls and scores of the fanciest of the heifers, too, while steers of prime perquisites just naturally weren't there. Old Jerry Holbrinn just naturally wasn't paying any bunch of range grafters to look after his cattle, inspecting brands out at Kansas City or Fort Worth or Abattoir or whatever. No, sirree!

With fifty thousand dollars in notes twice renewed, Jerry Holbrinn was doing the doggonest sums in arithmetic in his head ever in the course of his long, by-guess-and-by-gum life. Accustomed to remember approximately, he now found that whereas he figured about fourteen thousand head, he would be doggoned lucky if he had about eight thousand head, counting old stock and new, calves and strays.

JERRY spent a lot of time galloping around the lines of his domain, from clear up the Palettes to away down the Lingual, trying to see with his own old eyes, going down to Piebald, circling around Eagle Feather, and visiting other ranchers to find out what they knew, if anything. He even called at the Bar Question outfit, had a big, square feed and found that the kid, Put Dartley had in his books figures which showed that the Bar Question herd was being bled by some mysterious wound of the far flung pastures. Jerry's wildest guesses and mental calculations had their counterpart in the methodical black, red and white of the ranch which kept accurate tabs on its known incomes and outgoes.

"Put," Old Jerry exclaimed, "somethin's doggone wrong!"

"Looks like, Mr. Holbrinn."

"Well, what is it?"

"I don't know," the youth shook his head, "but I had a telephone message from Nathan Lustrole, manager of the Spark sheepfold——"

"To hell with any sheepman!"

"He says that raiders killed one of his shepherds."

"Damned pity he didn't get all of 'em killed!"

"And thieves ran off with a quarter to a half a band of sheep—five hundred to a thousand head, more or less."

"Somebody steal *sheep?*" Jerry Holbrinn asked, incredulously. "What 'n blazes for?"

"Ship—eat. *Quien sabe?*"

"But, Put—they might be stealing cattle, too!" Holbrinn squinted. "Anybody that'd steal sheep'd do anything. Stands to reason."

"They might, for a fact," Put Dartley admitted.

"Well, now then, we better organize!" Holbrinn declared.

"The Cattle Association——"

"Aw them damn outsiders! Taxing an' assessin' us f'r lookin' after our own cows! Huh! I can take care of my herd."

"Well, they've bled a lot out of mine. I don't know——"

"I've lost a lot . . . Dadblamed cow stealers! Wait'll I get a bead on 'em! Wait'll I get a rope on 'em, neck holt an' a cottonwood tree hoist!"

"I think they operate taking away a few head at a time. And working every time there's wind or rain to cover their tracks."

"You think so, kid?" Holbrinn puzzled. "Say, I believe y'r right! They could sell in the smelter an' mine towns. They could ship——"

"Not through the brand inspection, if you're a Cattle Association member." Put shook his head. "They've been sending me checks for steers and heifers picked up at six or seven points. Drifts before the wind, probably. More than makes up for my membership assessments."

Jerry Holbrinn gazed unconvinced. He didn't believe in helping or in being helped by general organization. He belonged to a day that was passing, perhaps.

"Let's go ride around, take a look to find what we can of what's going on."

Put Dartley gave a start of surprise. He knew well enough of the long armed neutrality with occasional bursts of hard feeling and line riding violence between the Spring Coil and the Bar Question outfit representatives.

"All right, let's go." The youth nodded assent, as though it were a proposal to take a turn around the nearest knob for exercise.

Within an hour, on the best of saddle horses, with a pack horse loaded with camp outfit and supplies, they rode forth, giving no word of their destination or intentions. Cowboys of the Bar Question crew saw the two take their departure. When the owners sally forth for business—that means the masters were going to attend to their own business, right!

Rifles were in saddle boots, great revolvers in their holsters, belts with long and short gun ammunition. Cattle thieves were working. Wretches had killed a sheep herder and stolen from his scattered flock. Off yonder, in the rough country to the northeast, north or somewhere, was an answer to the questions raised by thinning herds.

An old-timer, grizzled, hard, his hands pulled big by strain of reins and ropes, hooking like talons over saddle horns and just nicely gripping the big box magazine of the most powerful rifle of the day—that was the lank and shambling figure of Old Jerry Holbrinn, stooping forward with bent shoulders as he rode, his sparkling eyes sweeping the horizon and the near spaciousness from under brows like tangled mustachios.

And the companion he had impulsively chosen for the examination of the hills was also tall, slim, square shouldered, but resilient and limber with the grace of youth, tempered with the dignity of increasing burdens of responsibilities. A boy come flush into first independent manhood, passing twenty and ready for experience, for trial, for whatever grim things the job of ranch management might have for him to meet.

THE searchers rode steadily on. They hardly spoke. They were heading toward a jagged upheaval of pinnacles in the midst of great masses of stone and rolling summits. When night came the two rolled up in their blankets, covered by traps, and slept near a small spring.

Another day found them skirting along the edge of the higher Palette peak ranges, close up to the winter snows and enduring the sting of the spring melt and shivering in the shadows of the cañons into which they rode seeking signs.

So they ran into some new country. Jerry Holbrinn was willing enough to believe anything of sheepmen. They rode across sheep pastures and mourned between them about the good cattle country which the flocks had devastated, wrenching them willynilly from the herds. The sheep had not come up yet, for the grass was still frosted in the ground and the snow not all melted off the slopes.

And then they came to an odd phenomenon. A small band of sheep had come up the mountains out of the storm wash of a spring cloudburst. The beasts must have emerged from the rains through the clouds into clear sky to make those plain tracks over hard packed and crusted snow. There were horse tracks, where herders had driven these animals. Dogs had been with the drivers, too. Neither of the two pretended to be any judge of sheep but they recognized the work of several hundred sets of blunt pointed little hoofs.

"In a hurry to get to the spring pastures," Holbrinn grunted.

"They'd do better to let the grass get a good start before going into those mountain valleys." Put Dartley shook his head, gazing southward down long mountain shoulders into the far away winter pastures east of Blizzard Valley, over the low ranges from the Lingual fork. He could see black smoke, a locomotive at the foot of Blizzard Basin where he had tried to go to the Union High School. He did not feel so helpless now in the face of the cattle vanishing mystery as he had when confronting those rascals of torment who had driven him from the help of teachers to the hidden resources of a library of books. His hand went down to the saddle bag in which was Volume No. 197, near the end of which was his marker, and Volume No. 198 which he was going to read next, page by page, as he had a minute or an hour to go through the sentences.

"Yo' shore oughta git yo' brain loaded up!" Holbrinn remarked, having noticed that even as he rode across wide spaces Put Dartley snatched a sentence or a paragraph in the intervals when neither could think of anything worth saying—and so didn't try to talk.

Thus gently jeered, Dartley defended his efforts. He argued that his head was full of passageways, like the Carlsbad Caverns or a house too big for the family occupying it.

"I'm just filling up those vacant spaces," Put declared. "Course, I don't live much in those back parts and side tracks of my brain, but suppose sometime I'd take a notion to move out of my main outfit to live out on one of my line cabins so to speak. Then I'd have the supplies all laid in, and furniture, and things comfortable——"

"I need all the brains I got right around where I live," Holbrinn declared. "I never found no vacant places yet——"

"Well, I've read a hundred and ninety-seven going on a hundred and ninety-eight books, so far," the youth grinned. "I don't know where all the stuff goes to, but there isn't much comes up in the pitcher, not yet. I'm hoping someday I'll get full up. Then I won't have to read any more."

"I been watching yo' mouth," Holbrinn grinned. "Sometimes yo' talk sense. I don't know 'f it's native or imported. Lord help your folks if what you're reading in ever gets started t'other way! Why, they'll have to build a reg'lar irrigation dam, like over on the Gila River."

"That wouldn't help much," Put laughed. "That dam's full up of sand and gravel, now, and it ain't a reservoir any more, just a waterfall."

Thus they bandied words and swapped ideas, but when they came to things relating to their work in hand they were cattlemen, hunting for the leak which was cutting the profits out of their herds. They rode far, and camped one night in the cabin a nester had abandoned; another night they laid over in a trapper's main cabin, which was fragrant with musks; and on the third night they met the sheep coming northward into the higher mountain pastures following the upspringing of the grass after the rains and melting snows. And that night they rolled up on the ground beside a shepherd's wagon and ate mutton, night and morning.

"Gosh," Holbrinn grinned, after eating a lunch on a promontory from which they looked into the basin where the Spark outfit had its headquarters, "I'm sure glad to get that sheep taste out of my mouth."

"Why?" Put asked.

"Well, account of if I remembered how a wether tastes too long I mout—now and ag'in—turn sheep thief myse'f on a small scale."

When they had finished eating, they climbed into their saddles and went on.

THEY rode down into the Spark outfit. They gazed curiously at the pens, lambing corrals, the tight fences, sniffed at the strange smells and gazed reflectively at the gamboling lambs, goat kids and spare sheep dogs.

As they rode in, Nathan Lustrole, the Spark manager, walked out to welcome them. His smooth face, freshly shaved, nevertheless shone a bit on account of the tallow through his system. His eyes, the mildest in the world, eyed the two beef men with the utmost of inquiry and yet his face remained impassive.

"Light, gentlemen?" he suggested, his voice low and clear.

The two swung down and dropped the bridle reins.

"Thought we'd pass this way account of seeing where a band of sheep went across the high pastures, through the pass by the Palette pinnacles——"

"Sheep went through there?" Lustrole exclaimed quickly.

"Driven by five men and a pack of dogs," Dartley added.

"When, gentlemen?"

"They came up through the rain clouds and over the range. Couldn't see where they came from, not being good sheep trackers," Holbrinn said.

"It rained so hard it would wash out tracks," Lustrole nodded. "You knew about our man Wisnomore and his dog? Killed. We are obliged to you for that information. We'll be riding——"

He turned, called a signal and as three men appeared out among the sheds and from behind a building he told them to get horses ready. The cook at the kitchen appeared in the doorway, and to him Lustrole gave an order for five days' supplies, packed for saddles. Instantly the men turned and ran swiftly, lifting their knees, their backs perpendicular. The cowmen watched, their eyes sparkling with interest and appreciation. It didn't take the sheepmen long to get into action. No questions asked, no cigarets rolled. And yet Lustrole invited the two over to eat and a few minutes later, eating delicious chops, they sat at a table with the crew, the cook serving the meal and also hauling out supplies to put them into bags for the expedition up into the mountains, looking at those sheep tracks.

The visitors described what details they could. They had seen no stray sheep, but Lustrole said most of these had been left behind, the first rush of the flock. The raiders had swiftly weeded out the band for their run through the storm.

"They are good sheepmen," the manager declared, quietly spearing another juicy chop. "They have to be to bleed our bands the way they have been doing. You've had trouble with them?"

"Not a bit!" Holbrinn declared, angrily. "They don't bother us none. They just slice off a good bunch of beef an' drive it away without no least of disturbances. I'd a sight ruther they'd make all the rows in the world!"

"Men who steal sheep are apt to go about cattle stealing with less furor," Lustrole remarked gently. Then added:

"They killed Wisnomore and his dog. They shaped up their stolen band quickly. They left in the goats which Wisnomore liked to have with him. Goats hurry a band too fast for the near range. But Wisnomore went clear through to yon side, climbed the highest; so we let him use goats. The sheep stealers knew, of course, what they were about. They knew Wisnomore's band were fast walkers."

"I got an idea," Holbrinn turned to Dartley, and the listeners waited expectantly. "You know, trailing cattle, now. In the old days cows trailed buffalo an' it was hell to get 'em to turn back. Now I'm goin' to get some cattalo an' have them for herd leaders, trailin' in!".

"Suppose you have moose to get them to step high," Lustrole suggested.

"Nope," Holbrinn exclaimed. "I'm goin' to hire a coupla sheepmen for that."

Then they all laughed uproariously. Mrs. Spark had gone with her daughter to spend a few weeks in the college town. The wool clip had been heavy, the staple long, and the price good. Lots of lambs, too. And the sheep in fine condition. Now that they were stacking up great heaps of fodder, alfalfa, grass and studying winter browse, sheep were doing well. If the cattlemen desired, they could remain a while at the sheep outfit, but the two shook their heads. As they rode on their way, their mounts, including the pack horse, feeling the oats and first cut alfalfa, they saw the sheepmen, four of them, riding tall, narrow horses with dark old rifle scabbards buckled up close to the saddles so they wouldn't swing.

"Looks like we've sicked the sheepmen after rustlers," Dartley remarked presently.

"I never expected to have sheepmen working in with us!" Holbrinn said, his voice comical in its realization.

They stopped that night at Dartley's ranch, and in the morning Holbrinn went on to his own range. Apparently, as regards their cattle losses, they had accomplished nothing. But they had aroused the sheepmen with a hot lead and learned something: that there is a finesse to stealing sheep which might make a cattle rustler more efficient.

Five days later Lustrole arrived at the Bar Question in a return call of courtesy.

"We didn't find our sheep," he said. "It's a big country over beyond us. A lot of small outfits. Rough and they don't talk. At night they don't light lamps and they pull their curtains all the way down."

"Afraid of being shot through the windows?" Dartley asked.

"Yes. Afraid to talk," Lustrole nodded. "There are five or six little settlements down in the broken country—*Malpais,* Bad Lands. One they call Sticky Bottom——"

"I've heard of that——" Put remarked.

"We rode through there on Saturday afternoon. Bad hombres, all!" The sheep boss hesitated. "They were drinking. Wearing holster guns. And as we came through they stopped their shouting. Mike Pirqual, Pete Hensel, Bert Rudabon——".

"Bert Rudabon?"

"Yes," Lustrole said gently. "We knew them. They were all down at the lower end of Blizzard Basin, village boys——"

"Went to the Union High School down there."

"Yes. You know them," Lustrole nodded. "Those tough class kids are likely to run out their string to the end. Rudabon's a killer. We had no evidence but the way they lined up ready——"

"I get you," Dartley nodded. "That's at Sticky Bottom, eh? See any cattle?"

"Yes. But none of the brands through here." Lustrole was thoughtful. "We saw sheep, too—which are hard to identify when the tags are cut out. We looked at some. There were tags which had been replaced by other tags, but quite a while ago. It leaves ragged marks, scars, you know. Nothing conclusive. In that country, though, there would be blind basins, valleys, wide bottoms which no outsider could find, except by accident."

"You'll have someone go up there?" Dartley asked, and no answer returned, so he colored and said hastily, "I'll have —I'll see what I can do—think up!"

Lustrole nodded approval, saying:

"I'll be going, for we're going to comb that country for sheep."

CHAPTER VII

PACKING GUNS FOR BUSINESS

PUT DARTLEY had never worn a gun, as they say, "for business" until he heard that a sheep herder had been killed by raiders over on the Spark pasture. He recalled that June Spark had hinted she might in time of need call on him for help. He was glad to have been able to forestall the request by telling Lustrole about the lankies which had been run out of Wisnomore's band when the tender had been killed and the dog stretched dead by a .45 caliber revolver bullet.

Now the man-grown youth, thoroughly accustomed to superintending the Bar Question cattle from spring tallying through autumn branding and into all phases of buying and selling, grew into the habit of strapping on the .45 six-gun which his father had always carried. And he added to this open and fair warning, a flat and inconspicuous .38 automatic good for fast and unexpected action. As he rode his pastures he practiced steadily.

A day came when Put Dartley camped at the top spring of the stream which far below ran past his old 'dobe school headquarters and into the irrigation lands beyond the Union High School. Restlessly the man son of Mrs. Dartley was ransacking the range for the evidence or the opportunity which would put an end to the depredations of an unusually competent and up-to-date meat stealing gang. He had put the Cattle Association to work, and he presumed they had a man over in the *Malpais,* or Bad Land washes, into which he and Jerry Holbrim had seen the sheep tracks heading. They had not told him what they would do, except that it would be "something." He had made no suggestions.

Weather wise, Put looked around him, felt the warmth and studied the milkiness of the sky. A certain breathlessness was in the air. When dusk came, he was already stretched on his tarpaulin, with his blanket under him but uncovered in the ominous calm and warmth. For a high and arid country the sky was strangely vacant that night.

Put tried to sleep. It was too warm. Despite the fact that he was tired, he sat up uneasily and whistled for his horse. The animal, an old pet which he had broken and trained himself, whistled in return, blowing an enthusiastic snort—a different note from the animal's usual answer. He went down the hundred yards to the grass and found the horse shuddering with some expectancy, welcoming him with a sharp, crowding nuzzling.

And then the horse suddenly whirled around from facing up the valley to looking down, ears forward, mane and tail lifting, neck arching, seeing or hearing something. In vain Put tried to see or hear what the horse was noticing. When he went up to his blanket and tarp the animal followed, stopping to look back, sniffling a subdued snort. Other horses, sure enough!

Put stood, hesitating, after taking a drink at the spring. He adjusted powerful little glasses, trying to see into the dense night. He watched the horse, though, and after nearly an hour he realized that the animal had turned its nose from nearly southwest to east of south. Whatever the horse knew, the object of its attention was moving easterly across the head of Lingual Creek.

Put Dartley was looking for cattle rustlers. He wondered at his own lack of perspicuity, divination. Swiftly, now, he packed his outfit and threw it up under an overhanging ledge. He spread his blanket on the horse and hauled the double cinches of the saddle. He felt for his revolver and his automatic; made sure of his ammunition. And then started with chagrin at his own curious negligence as a great drop of rain came splashing down.

"Cloudburst!" he said in an exclamation to himself as he swung up into the saddle to hunt rascals in a storm.

Clever thieves, those scoundrels! They knew the weather, and when a blizzard or a norther, a rain of gentle sweep or a downpour of terrific volume was at hand, they rode! Tonight, knowing a cloudburst was due, they were abroad.

Another drop splashed down like a pailful. He glanced up and saw the gathered light in a hurtling, convoluting drop which looked as large as a liquid glass bulb; a rain drop that seemed as large as a teacup in the gray dark and which exploded with a smack on a flat rock. The stars had vanished. Long streamers of white veiling extended into the skies beneath the spread massiveness of suddenly formed clouds. And then there came stringing a myriad of sparkles, the precipitation so heavy that it pounded the rider's hat brim down on all sides. The horse lurched in alarm, but he assured the animal with a calm voice as he rode to intercept the horses which were probably herding stolen cattle.

A flare of lightning turned the rain into crystals through which the colors flashed and leaped, disappearing so suddenly that the impression was of just a glimmer through globes hung suspended in the air. By and by, thunder roared and then more lightning flew. The rider held his course toward the southwest, watching his horse's ears by the lightning. Their set might indicate his approach to those strangers passing in the night. At the same time he realized he was taking a chance in a hundred or so, trying to locate anything on the move in such a downpour in the dark.

Happily, the slope he was traversing was not a steep down-grade. He crossed the dividing line of Lingual Creek and held his course out of the valley, onto a point and down into the plains where the Spark sheep were soon to arrive out of the southeast.

PROGRESS was slow, but by his luminous dial watch he had been going an hour when his horse threw up its head unmistakably, turning from side to side. A touch, and the horse stopped. Put waited. He could see no sign of what the horse was watching, except as the animal turned and looked from left to right and right to left.

A flash of lightning; and still no shadow, even, betrayed to Dartley's eyes what was on the way that night. He leaned forward and the horse surged ahead, uncertain underfoot in the loose muck and stones. They had gone perhaps sixty or seventy yards when Put himself snuffled.

"Wet cattle!" he exclaimed. "They're sweating by in the night."

He had caught the unmistakable scent of a herd of beef going by in the warm downpour. He turned to follow that scent by nose in the gloom. In his hand he had ready the old .45 his father had carried, and used not infrequently for "business". The son was ready, now, for work of the kind which will hardly ever disappear as long as humans grow beef in big country and eat it from the tables.

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He rode out of the scent trail. He swung to the left and picked it up again. He had the scent carried away by a varying breeze which ran through the falling rain, and he had to circle and swing trying to find it again. In his eagerness to catch up with the cattle, he lost the tracks. And he could not long delay because that downpour would quickly beat the scent of the sweating beasts to the earth.

They came down into a low, narrow wash—and it *was* a wash, now. The water was coming down out of the Palette Mountain breaks in successive waves, with frothing whitecaps breaking as they rolled. Behind each wave the water was inches deeper. On the edge, in a loose clay, lightning revealed to Put a myriad of cattle tracks with the edges caving in and water running down where the cows had punched the ground. A glimpse of a horse track confirmed his suspicion. He urged his horse into the wash, not knowing whether it was three or thirty feet deep. If cows could get across—well, he could!

But as he shoved his revolver into the holster to free his hands the forehoofs of the horse went into deep water and Put went over alongside. A wave four or five feet high had come along, and man and beast found themselves rolling and struggling, plunging and scrambling. Something hit Put and he shoved it away. A juniper root snag. They crawled out on the yon side somewhere and rested a bit.

When Put walked along with the horse, he bore to the left and tried again to pick up the cattle tracks, but he could neither find them by lightning, nor smell them with his nostrils. By the lay of the land he picked a course, however. He bore a little to the north for the high climb into the pass through which the Wisnomore sheep had been driven. He urged his tired horse to make better time. He crowded diagonally up the great slope through the juniper belt and laughed to himself with satisfaction when he felt the ground change under his own feet at the last of the climb. He had held his course in the storm and had hit into the pass just about where the Spark sheep had gone up out of the storm.

But this cloudburst came from ten thousand feet up. The pass was running, soggy wet. Working back and forth up toward it, Put Dartley tried in vain to pick up the band of cattle. Perhaps they had not come that way. Perhaps they had been driven further east and kept in lower country. Perhaps the rustler knew some way through the high breaks themselves. Put ranged till dawn without success. He crossed the pass. No cattle had gone through there the previous night or this early morning, he could be sure of that. Then he proceeded on foot, leading his laggard horse back down out of the scattering of pines into the long-slope junipers.

And then, suddenly, he was alongside sheep. Sheep *maa-ing* and led by gaunt, wet goats with shiny black horns as sharp as lances, bounding and bobbing on their way. A wet dog, like a wolf, scurried by, discovered him and darted aside. Wet sheep smell as strongly as wet cattle. Put wrinkled his nose in disgust and looked around wondering. From their course he thought the woollies were coming out of the southeast.

Then a man loomed in the gray, thin storm, turning a sheep back into line. Put turned to look the fellow in the face. The sheep driver threw up his head, ducked his face ahead, squinting from a bushy face, his eyes glittering darkly. For an instant he hesitated, glared and then his eyes bulged as he went for his holstered revolver.

The break was about even, but Put Dartley shoved his own .38 automatic to the front and let go a fusillade of three shots while two old black smoke shells boomed in the thundering storm. The sheepman stumbled back as though his feet were slipping, wagging his head.

Put gave a gasp of horror as the shepherd sagged to the ground, shaking his head in dying protest.

"I've seen him!" Put whispered. "That's one of the Spark band tenders!"

The rain still pounded down; rivulets poured in every notch and gorge. It wasn't good form for cattlemen to kill sheep tenders. It would be hard to explain to a jury.

Put Dartley headed for home, glad that the little washes he waded down left no tracks to be followed.

CHAPTER VIII

RUDABON LAUGHS AT A GRIM JOKE

MANAGER LUSTROLE of the Spark sheep ranch rode with four men into the back country of the sheep pasture, arrayed and equipped for war. It was not the first time. A sheepman can protect his own. He does not look for trouble. He does not boast or brag about his occupation. His voice is low, his appearance odd, his odor that of lanolin, his habits retiring.

Manager Lustrole did not tell anyone whither he was bound—not even the four men who rode with him. They did not show themselves even to the shepherds who were working the Spark bands northward into the agreed lands east of Lingual Creek. The four understood their business when they cleaned their rifles and looked into the muzzles of their big revolvers. They could shoot, especially in the interest of sheep protection.

Manager Nathan Lustrole came of sheep ancestry. He had begun as a boy to go with sheep. He had the walk, the carriage, the ideals and the instinct of the shepherd.

Lustrole had looked at the sky. He had held his warm hand to the wind. He had studied certain flowers blooming with their roots in the moisture of the unusually plentiful spring rains. He had noticed, perchance, a certain thickness in the petals of flowers and a certain turning of their faces to the sky not in the manner of those looking at the sun. He saw leaves of trees, generally stiff and resisting the wind, now begin to flip and flop as their stems turned limp.

He was riding for a long time with the four men of his shepherds' posse when he turned and remarked:

"It is going to rain."

"Yes," the other riders nodded, approvingly. "We knew that!"

They did not make any camp when night fell. They were not yet where their leader planned to go or be. In the thickening twilight, without the usual brilliant sunset, they kept on going, swinging wide. It began to rain in great drops.

They knew where they were—just at the end of the long bare ridge rising into the Palette Mountain breaks. Ahead of them, as they rode in the downpour, was the edge of the pass. Here there were some scattering pines. The way was quite wide. But where they took up their stand was the narrowest part of the passage. When they came to look into the ground, by means of electric flashes, they did not find any sheep tracks.

"It may be we shall not be lucky to-night." Lustrole shook his head. "They have just gone through with a bunch of cattle. About eighty head. Perhaps they'll not bother sheep in this storm."

"It'll do no harm to wait a bit," one of the four others said grimly.

"If we do not get them this storm, then in some other," another said.

Therefore they stood waiting, none the less watchful because it might be sheep stealers were not working on that night. And so, that following morning, while thunder rolled and lightning flashed in the misty gray gloom, with intervals of quiet, falling rain, one reached another till all had fair warning.

"*Sheep!*" the shepherd posse whispered to one another, and wiped the muzzles of their wet revolvers on their sleeves.

Plodding into the wind, facing it, a band of sheep came bobbing along in fits and starts, walking and tiptilting forward through the pass, the flock narrowing as they traveled, led by goats.

Along the two flanks raced dogs, five of them—wonders at that work of fast driving, wolflike in their snooping attitude, but prancing up on their hind legs at times to survey their charges. Behind them, riding like vultures in the saddle, yellow in their oilskins, came five men. Sheep stealers by the wholesale!

They were expecting nothing. For two, the crack of instant doom was in the fire which the sheep posse opened. Another pitched down, and the horse ridden by a fourth collapsed as the rider started up in his stirrups, ready on the instant, throwing open his slicker and snatching at his weapon. But flinging itself, the stricken horse rolled, trapping this man where he fell. The fifth man raced away, caracoling his horse into a Spanish salute, rearing and then going, careless of everything so long as he escaped the showering of sheepmen bullets.

The dogs, one moment in a frozen pose of astonishment, came in for their share of the sheepmen's attention. No sooner had the men been disposed of than the bullets slapped at the dogs which were used by the stealers in getting the mutton away. Two dogs were caught napping, and one squealed as he threw up his head, stumbling and throwing himself away. Two fled.

The man pinned by his fallen horse

struggled frantically to pull loose. Lustrole and another ran to him. The thief threw up his weapon, which he had fired several times in the sharp mêlée, but he pulled his knuckles white in vain. The weapon was jammed and did not fire. The sheepmen hesitated for a bare moment, Lustrole reflecting whether to kill him or not. He decided, after looking back on the sheep trail, not to do it. Presently he would rue that decision to capture this one alive.

Binding him with knots the sheepmen use, bends that hold against the kicks and jerks of wether, ram or ewe, they contemptuously, yet with a minimum of words, jerked the prisoner from under his own dead mount. They gathered around the wounded wretch who was floundering in his agony, gasping and gurgling blood out of the corners of his mouth. He presently died like the other two.

"Not so bad. Three dead and one caught, out of five!" Lustrole spoke in the low calm voice of his kind, his face shining with a few rain drops which had fallen on it.

They looked at their prisoner, a tall, handsome, bright-blue eyed fellow, with curly hair and set lips, who turned his face this and that way in obvious wild hope of making a breakaway.

"Know him?" Lustrole turned to his men gently.

"I've seen him," one tried to remember.

"So have I," the manager asserted. "It was down one time at Water Table when Miss June was going to school. He was younger then . . . I don't know his name."

The captive snarled, choked, strained impotently at his bonds.

"We'll send Miss June his picture—if no one of us recognizes him," another said.

"She'll be home next week, anyhow," Lustrole added. "He seems to recognize the name of Miss June Spark. He was stealing Spark sheep. It doesn't pay."

"Boys—" the prisoner started to speak, but the posse paid no attention to him. They did not even tell him what to do. They shoved him on his way and loaded him on one of the horses of the fallen men, both of which they caught. They packed two of the dead, lighter weighted men on the other thief's horse. While Lustrole guarded, the four others herded the stolen sheep band and brought it back down the wind—not an easy thing to do.

"They're part of Poletro's band," one returned to say presently. "I know that big goat."

"I thought it was," Lustrole nodded. "We'll go back to the bench ground. Wisnomore was killed. We must make sure of Poletro, who knows sheep. Come on."

SO THEY started back through the pass. Fortune was with the sheepmen. The storm vanished in a gray mist. The sun came darting down through the cloud which was clinging to the mountainous breaks and streaking in a faint breeze behind the squat junipers, dragging away in wreaths which presently rose and began to cast shadows in the form of tiny white clouds.

They rode, with the prisoner led ignominiously on a rope end. They did not once speak to him. At the same time they did relax their vigilance. Out of the pass, they turned the band of sheep around to the southward.

Down yonder, the slope slacked out onto a wide bench. Right there, Lustrole, who was riding on the band point with his prisoner, saw something ahead of him. He sat up straighter, staring. Another sheepman, riding behind the prisoner, leaned to see what had excited the manager. He saw the same thing.

A man was lying face down in the wet sand of a tiny alluvial fan washed from the slope. The water had cut a tiny sand bar around the side of the face, and trailed more sand below him, leaving ripples and gouges where the particles of stone had washed or deposited. The two rode close by, and the three horses, with that of the prisoner in the middle, stopped, facing that inert figure.

Deliberately, Lustrole swung down and looked, to be sure. He rose, with his face impassive and his eyes blazing.

"It is Poletro!" he cried.

When the sheep and goats had gone by, the other shepherds came and looked.

"Poletro?" one asked.

"Yes, Poletro," Lustrole replied, and all four gazed at the prisoner.

"Why—Poletro!" the bound man exclaimed. "What killed him?"

At that exclamation the four interchanged glances. They did not say anything, but two turned to the body and stooping, examined closely the details of posture and appearances.

"We better leave him?" one asked.

"He is our dead. There are four to testify to the coroner," Lustrole replied. "Turn him over!"

And when this had been done they knew what had killed Poletro. A bullet had gone through his heart. Folded under him was his right arm, and clasped in its hand was a .45 revolver. His wrist was doubled up, and he had fired two shots.

"It didn't come clear through," Lustrole remarked. "See if the bullet lodged in his back? Hold on . . . All right! He was hit twice more."

Hands accustomed to feel through wool for tallow on the ribs ransacked the back of the dead sheep herder's woolen shirt. Two bullets had gone through.

"Here it is," one of the two searchers said presently, and a moment later he had cut out the missle with a sharp pocket knife. "One stuck in his shirt."

He handed the recovered projectile to Lustrole who turned the lined and stained missile in his hand.

"A .38 automatic," he presently declared.

"He had a .38 automatic!" one sheep herder cried out, leveling an accusing finger at the prisoner who flinched, his eyes bulging and his tongue exclaiming:

"I didn't shoot him! I didn't kill him!"

"These others—they had revolvers," another of the sheep posse said, and to make sure they went over the holsters found on the dead.

"There was only one .38 automatic," the first to accuse declared.

"One man rode away," Lustrole reminded them thoughtfully.

"I saw heem plain!" the most taciturn of the four spoke up. "He had an open holster, a Frontier black-butt revolver. That I saw. He was drawing it when I pulled on one of thees daid. Then I tried, prob'ly too late, for dat one who go avay. So ve better hang dis feller, henh?"

The four sheepmen turned on the prisoner. They hesitated in that instant, undetermined what to do. The prisoner had flinched a moment before, but now he laughed. The four men glared at him for what they thought was his bravado. They gazed at his bright blue eyes. They twinkled.

"You laugh!" Lustrole spoke, his voice so low that it almost seemed he was speaking mostly to himself.

"Yes. Look at my pistol there . . . How many times was it shot?"

Lustrole pulled the cartridge clip and studied it.

"Three times," he said. "No—twice. One shell is jammed in the barrel."

"I know . . . The damned thing! I'd shot it out with you but for that——"

"You didn't have a chance," Lustrole replied and shook his head.

"I didn't want one—stealing sheep—having anything to do with the woollies!" the prisoner taunted himself for his folly. The sheepmen glowered under that fearless insult.

"Boyser, stay here with *it*," Lustrole said. "I'll send the wagon up—Poletro's wagon. We may as well leave these other dead here for the wagon, too. Bring them all down to the house."

Mounting, Lustrole led the way and two of the shepherd posse followed behind the flock of recovered loot. They found Poletro's wagon and half the band of sheep he had been tending.

"He left the dogs looking after the strays while he chased the stealers," Lustrole remarked to the two possemen as they watched the animals flocking together joyously, after their separation.

"He could run fast enough to catch them . . . And he was shot then," one declared quietly, but he choked a little as he turned to gaze malevolently at the prisoner. "We should hang him. It was *his* .38 automatic!"

Again the prisoner laughed, remarking:

"The joke's on me. You'll never believe it, but it is!"

"We can trust the law to hang a man for this murder, I think," Lustrole said turning to the two, and then added. "You, David, catch Poletro's horse and harness the mule to the wagon. Bring in the dead. One of you stay with the sheep. Someone will come tomorrow to look after them."

SO LUSTROLE and the other man went on down to the sheepfold. He stopped there to telephone to Piebald, the county court seat. After they had eaten, Lustrole turned to the prisoner.

"We go on riding in tonight, which is

best, I think," he said, with a significance which was not to be misunderstood.

"Might's well hang me now as six weeks from now," the prisoner grinned. "But the joke's on me, at that."

The sheep manager gave him a glance of contempt for his levity. After eating, a light wagon was hitched to a team of good horses and, with a good driver and a man on the front seat, Lustrole sat back with the prisoner for the long fast ride down to the railroad at Jubilee, below Water Table in the irrigated farmland. They could see the village lights for many miles, and as they came to the long main street through Water Table which went on down the line into Jubilee, Lustrole and the spare man on the front seat held their carbines ready.

When they entered Jubilee, though it was well after midnight, they found several small groups of men down in the business part of town. These did not leave the sidewalks as the team galloped on its way. At the railroad station a locomotive with two cars was waiting, all lighted up. When the light wagon drew to a stop, the horses on their haunches, a small group of men ran out and surrounded it.

"All right, Lustrole!" a voice declared. "Hand 'im out!"

"Yes, sir, Sheriff!" Lustrole replied and from under the top emerged the prisoner.

The sheriff and his posse rushed the prisoner onto the train, and Lustrole followed.

On the train Sheriff Gaylord stood back, as the locomotive spun its drive wheels to scurry down the valley, looking at the prisoner by the light of the passenger car lights.

"So! It's you, is it?"

The prisoner looked him in the eyes, smiling.

"Well, Bert Rudabon, you've killed one man too many I reckon," the sheriff shook his head. "Stealing sheep, too!"

At that the prisoner looked away.

They cut the sheep knot ropes and put handcuffs and leg irons on in their place. Lustrole told the sheriff what had taken place, and in cool, painstaking words gave an exact account of what had transpired as he had seen it.

"Here is the bullet," he said at last, handing the sheriff the jacketed projectile, with its creases and its tragic stains.

"Don't reckon you've anything to say to this, have you?" Gaylord remarked adding. "Course what you say'll be used against you."

Rudabon laughed.

"Just so. All the way down he has laughed," Lustrole declared, giving the killer a glance more of wonder than of scorn.

"They call him the Laughing Killer," the sheriff said. "He would laugh, I expect, standing on the gallows."

"I'm not anxious to die, Sheriff," Rudabon said. "But you'd laugh—if you could believe what I could tell."

"Well, tell it!"

"Sheriff, the only shots I fired last night were at Lustrole here and the men with him who bushwhacked us. If my gun hadn't jammed I'd likely got one of them, too. But I didn't kill Poletro."

"Your automatic's a .38?"

"Yes."

"Any of the others with you have .38's?"

"No. Nary a one!"

"Well, I'll bite. Who did kill Poletro, then?"

"That's what aches me, Sheriff," Rudabon gave the sheep manager a glance of puzzlement, not unmixed with contempt. "Course, Lustrole, here, if he'd had a .38 automatic would have killed him——"

"Me kill Poletro?" Lustrole exclaimed incredulously.

"Suppose you caught a sheep band tender selling out half his band to sheep stealers?" Rudabon asked.

"No. A sheep tender keeps faith!"

"Always?" Rudabon asked.

"Well—probably . . . Yes, there have been those who were traitors."

"Like sheep dogs which kill sheep, eh?" the sheriff asked.

"It might happen. But not Poletro," Lustrole shook his head. "He gave hi life to protect his sheep!"

"Well, have it that way," Rudabo settled back. "Gimme a cigaret, will yo Sheriff?"

"Yes." The sheriff drew a packet.

"Good uns, too? You always treat 'e nice when yo're going to hang 'em, don you?" Rudabon asked.

The sheriff and his deputies stared the youth. They knew he had killed me They studied him for the twitches, watch his eyes for the flickers, kept their eyes on his fingers, his ear lobes and looked at his feet. There wasn't a faintest trace, not a tiniest movement to indicate that Rudabon was nervous. Instead, when he had puffed slowly two or three times, looking at the rings he blew in the tipping and shaking car, he chuckled and then laughed attractively.

Bad? That was Bert Rudabon. Sheep stealer, murderer of a faithful tender of a band . . . But facing death he could and did laugh at the joke on him. The joke, he said, was unbelievable. He didn't claim Poletro as his friend, but why should he kill a pal in the sheep stealing business?

"That fellow who got away?" Gaylord suggested. "He could come in and testify to the dicker you made with Poletro."

"That's another cinch," Rudabon shook his head. "Two of us went in to Poletro and made the bargain. He was to have a dollar a head. He helped us shape out the flock. He had it cut in two for us when we came in. But Mike Pirqual was the only one who knew Poletro sold out. He's dead."

"Suppose somebody else shot him," Gaylord argued. "What'd he do it for?"

"Sheriff, that's what makes me laugh. How come?"

"Well," Gaylord said grimly, "you're only chance in the world is that the man who did the killing—if it wasn't you—will come out and convince the jury he did it."

"He'd have to be a good man, for a fact," Rudabon shook his head, serious at last. "And he'd have to be a brave man to do it, too. There aren't many'd want these damned sheepmen down on 'em for killing one of their shepherds."

"That is so," Lustrole nodded. "From owner to the young pup dog, we stand together looking after the sheep. When a man kills one of us, then we demand his punishment. You have maligned Poletro who is dead. You say he sold out to you. But the witness, he is dead! He is a thief of sheep, besides. No, you did murder——"

"Then killing three of us isn't enough?" Rudabon sneered.

"Then the man who killed Poletro is not dead!" Lustrole said. "He was the killer, the worst of them all. To steal sheep—that is prison. But to kill a shepherd—for that a man dies!"

The listeners caught the inflexibleness of the sheepmen's character in that declaration. And when they locked Rudabon in the Piebald jail, within the day that was breaking sheepmen began to come to town, and they increased in numbers for the inquest. They came striding up and down the streets, lifting their knees with limp ankles, their backs straight. Herders, owners, managers, sheepfold boys, clippers; all kinds, from the men who walked with a staff and were accompanied by their dogs to the buxom women and, in especial, one young woman, June Spark.

She represented the ownership of the largest of the sheep outfits. It was her employee, Poletro, who had been killed. It was her men who had circled and headed the sheep stealers. And now she came to Piebald to live in the big hotel.

A gentle voiced, sweet, impassive faced girl, with bright lips, cheeks of changing color and beauty. She did not smile in these days. Her childhood had been passed in the days when sheep were washing in a tidal wave to inundate pasturage occupied by cattle. She had seen the dead of the flocks, then. She had known the grim toll sheepmen took when they strode into the cattle country.

Relentless, the Spark outfit demanded the punishment of the man who had killed Poletro, the humble tender of a band.

"He must hang!" June Spark said quietly to the prosecuting attorney who came to pay his respects to half of the political powers of the Blizzard county realm, adding quickly, "It is not I that demand it, but justice. Thieves must not kill our shepherds. They must not steal our sheep."

"Rudabon went to school with you?" a newspaper reporter inquired.

"It is true."

"And Mike Pirqual, who was killed?"

"Yes, he too."

"And Pete Hensel?"

"Those three."

"You knew them?"

"They were rough players, bullies and cheaters. I knew them by sight, but that is all."

So the forces of public opinion, of law

and fate swung steadfastly, irresistibly into line.

On top of all came word that the cattlemen had gone over into the thieves' domain and recovered not only sheep, but many cattle.

CHAPTER IX

THE FENCE FOR STOLEN MEAT

PUT DARTLEY arrived home at the Bar Question outfit, dead tired and on foot, dragging his laggard horse behind him. The storm had partly cleared away. He would never know exactly how he made his way across the washes whose floods spread wider than their cut-bank courses. Yet when he came in, threw off his saturated clothes and washed the sand out of his boots, no one chanced to notice his arrival. He spent the clock around in bed, turned out in the morning with the crew, to eat, and picking five of his best men he headed over to the Spring Coil brand outfit, where he found Old Jerry Holbrinn with six of his own men and a posse gathered from outfits far and wide.

Definitely, now, the cattlemen knew that their cattle were being run over the mountains into the washing down country known as the *Malpais*, or Bad Lands, hundreds of square miles of country where nesters, homesteaders, and small and suspicious outfits had their dugouts, sod roof, 'dobe, and even log cabins.

Armed with rifles and revolvers, and carrying war packs of supplies on horses, the old-timers who had seen their herds thinned out inexplicably were just naturally going over to drag through the Bad Lands to see what they could find. Two score and ten men, looking for business. They didn't know what they might be able to learn, but they intended to increase their information about those neighbors of whom they had known so little.

Some years had passed since they had organized thus. Now they dropped their own minor problems of fractious temperament for the big stuff of common loss. Old Jerry Holbrinn and Put Dartley led the way. Two and two, the others followed. Put was guide; Jerry was captain. Everyone would have his due say when the time came.

The sun warmed down through the scattering clouds when they rode on a beautiful afternoon up the Palette Mountains into the pass. Through this had gone the band of cattle which Put had snuffled in the storm. Eagerly the posse read the water washed trough of the pass. Here, game trails and cattle and sheep paths had led into the narrows amid the scattering evergreens.

Plainly, cattle had slogged through that pasture, and the beasts had punched holes in the wet ground; and these had filled with water.

Afterwards, though, sheep had come. Hundreds of them. The sheep tracks aroused only feelings of disgust in the minds of the cattlemen. The rustlers had run their cattle through the north end of the sheep domain. And here were sheep which had also been driven during the storm. That might mean nothing, or a lot. The little hoofs had punched out the most of the cattle prints. The sheep presently came to mean a whole lot. Up in the narrows of the pass, where the open passageway ran between steep banks on either side, the sheep had turned back abruptly. And here were horse tracks, too.

"Hold back, boys!" Holbrinn stopped the cavalcade. "Let's look this over!"

So they went to studying keenly the sudden reversal of the course of the sheep band. Presently one man picked up a hat which had been trampled under the hoofs of the sheep. They washed the hat in a puddle to look at it. Written on the inside was the name *"Mike Pirqual."*

The words were passed around.

"I knew him," Dartley said. "He went to school down in Water Table Union High when I did."

"A bad hombre," another said. "I remember hearing he was caught down yonder, at Piebald. Disorderly conduct—drunk."

"Yeh! He worked a while for a butcher-drover from over in the mines," another remarked. "Coupla years ago Short Knife Cusaka—that's the butcher—bought six heifers from me. Pirqual was with him an' coupla other boys. One name of Hensel, I reckon."

"Hensel?" Dartley took up. "He and Pirqual ran together at the school."

"Yeh. I heard sunthin' about that," Holbrinn remarked. "They worked oveh here in the Bad Lands. Some older fellers with them. We'd better have a talk with Cusaka. It mout be in'trestin'!"

"Oh, boys!" a man who was looking around by himself shouted. "Look here!"

Many turned to go look. There, in a low place, was a dead horse—shot. The beast was in a kind of waterhole, so no one had noticed it at first. And, on beyond, they found where the head sheep had been turned back.

"What do you make of it, Jerry?" someone asked the leader.

Holbrinn squinted.

"They were stealing sheep in the storm, too . . . And that horse was hit in a fight. The sheepmen got their woollies back, all right. Down there's where the cattle rustlers drove their bunch. Looks like about eighty of them. Come on. We got to do as well as the shepherds did."

So the cattlemen continued on their way.

But Put Dartley was swinging over along the edge of the passageway where brush and timber was growing.

"Eh, boys!" he called across, stooping as he did so. "Here's something. Empty .30-30's."

"Bushwhacked 'em, the sons of guns!" one of them ejaculated. "Those sheepmen must of headed them——"

"And they didn't miss 'em all, either. Some of those shepherds can sure shoot!" Holbrinn acknowledged frankly.

PRESENTLY the posse headed over the edge, beyond, and went down into the cedar grown tumult of rolling lands, deep washes, winding and difficult trails, now running floods of cloudburst torrents. Five miles down they came to a log cabin with a split puncheon, shingle roof. Grimly the visitors surrounded the building and rounded up a tall, slabsided, shambling fellow whose eyes were bulging with alarm.

"Bunch of cows go through here last night?" Holbrinn demanded.

"I don' know, suh!" the man stuttered. "I mind's my own business. I don't know——"

"All right," Holbrinn said, sharply. "Theh's a convenient limb, boys, on that pine tree. Feller as ignorant as this un better be put out of his misery!"

Dropping on his knees the nester yelled for mercy. A heavy, flat faced woman came running out of the cabin, frantic with fear. She was followed by five or six children and a gaunt, bent girl of eighteen or nineteen years. Their screams filled the ears. Nevertheless a lariat went over the limb, and, with the hondo under his ear, the migrant from the Carolinas consented to talk. Personally, he hadn't mixed any with the neighbors on beyond. But he had seen bunches of cattle and bands of sheep going through at the time of every blizzard, sleet, and heavy rain during the three years of his residence there. But he didn't know where they were driven to.

The cowmen left two of their number to watch the family, making sure no messengers were sent around them with the alarm. They now had information about the locations of other cabins further on. They heard the names of people who had been beneath their contempt, newcomers and small-timers. Sweeping on their way, they kept to the trail of the cattle where it led into the steep sided valley. The actual hoof prints vanished in a wide, gravel bottomed valley.

A whimpering boy was their guide. He took them for miles until they came to a wide flat, grown to scattering hardwood. Here were eighty-one head of cattle, Bar Question and Spring Coil brand, both.

"They ain't been scattered out yet," the youth whimpered.

The unwilling, frightened guide had been helping drive cattle and sheep out into that hundreds of square miles for three years. The success of the stealing had depended entirely on the failure of the big ranches to know that they were losing bands of sheep or bunches of cattle. The nesters and settlers, arriving poverty-stricken, with perhaps four or five gaunt cows of low degree, had gone over the Palette Mountain divide and picked up perhaps a five hundred dollar bull to breed up their own mongrel beef. They had stolen good Hereford cows and were sending out young steers and heifers which had originated in the crosses of stolen stock, or from their own cows and rustled bulls. They sold old brands to Cusaka.

Sheep they had taken in the same way, hiding the broken up bands away back in the *Malpais*, whose fastnesses offered innumerable mesas and bottoms — rolling lands so rough and poor that no big ranch had ever been established there. But little fellows to whom a hundred head of beef was a fortune—they had taken the draws and tablelands, the patches of rolling hills up to a thousand or two acres, and covered them with lambs and calves they claimed to be their own.

Not at all interested in sheep, the Blizzard Valley cowmen started, then and there, a round-up. They took fathers of families as hostages and sent the gasping, weeping boys and youngsters out to bring down the cows with or without brands. An incredible number of the mongrels and stolen bred-up stock came shambling and plunging down the narrows, out into the main valley of the Bad Land slopes.

THEY went on, those angry cowmen, into the cañon where the mine community of Sticky Bottom stretched along the depths, and, unheralded, they arrived at Short Knife Cusaka's place of business—a small abattoir. Cusaka was at home, a cleaver in one hand and a hind leg of wether in the other. He was cutting down the spine when a number of slim men, rather tall and generally slightly bowed of leg, came in over the old-fashioned sawdust on the floor. Three of these stopped around Cusaka, while ten or twelve others went right on through into the back, where the slaughterhouse of the establishment was enclosed by a high fence well plugged against peeking through.

"Hey! You no got to go dere!" Cusaka shouted, as out of the corner of his eye he discovered the visitors. "Nobody admitta in-a dat place!"

"Oh, yes, Cusaka!" someone said, and the butcher turned square around, cleaver in hand, firmly gripped.

He stood there, his little black eyes blinking beneath a brow bulging above his face like a hot dog bread roll. He recognized one of the three.

"You—*Mister* Holbrinn!" he whispered. "*You!*"

"Yes, me," the gaunt cowman admitted without parley.

They stood there for ten or twenty minutes. Looking past them Cusaka could see, without, a good many horses with saddles on them, and a number of the animals had occupants. Some of the occupants were prisoners out of the *Malpais*, and at sight of these Cusaka stirred uneasily, his hand working along the handle of his cleaver. That instrument of the butcher profession was about nine inches square, and it had a well worn, greasy look to it. The tool had been ground on both sides, nearly an inch back from the cutting edge.

Cusaka was himself a wide, thick, blunt kind of a man, dark faced, and his shoulders bulging out roundly. His bloody sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and his forearms looked to be nearly five inches across. His legs were spread apart, leaning-pillar wise. He had a substantial look, all but his eyes and mouth which were working more and more, a flashing in the one and inarticulate grunting from the other. He kept recurring in his glances to the three big revolvers which relentlessly covered his body, converging from three angles at about the middle of him as they pointed.

His ears moved as he listened for sounds without. A little later he heard what he must have expected.

"Eh, Jerry!" a voice hailed. "Come 'ere a minute!"

Holbrinn, without relaxing his vigilance, summoned two men from outside and then went through to the voice, which was Put Dartley's.

Put had discovered, out in a shed, an odd and immensely clumsy machine. It had blunt claws and a huge, rough, viselike pair of mandibles, or ragged edged bird beaks. Here, two men shoved a green cowhide into the contrivance, pulled a lever, and the grips sogged down on the messy hair and skin, pulled and jerked, and then opened up. By that work a section of the skin was ragged out of the hide. And the section was sometimes as large as a man's hand and sometimes two feet across. A big box was full of these patches, and everyone of them bore the brand of some cattle outfit. Dumped into a pit and covered with unslaked lime, the direct evidence of brand destruction was covered for all time.

Cusaka was a fence for stolen beef, mutton of all kinds on the hoof. He had done a lively business for a long time. Now he stood, cleaver in hand, facing the victims of his commercial enterprise; and neither side liked the condition of affairs in the least. With a bull-like roar of rage Cusaka did the one thing he could think of. He jumped. The bullets he ran into caught him in mid-air and threw him back into the wall of his butcher shop ice box. It may be, had he submitted tamely to arrest, he would have gone to jail for two or three years. Or maybe he would have been hung among the carcasses in his establishment. The cattlemen's posse had had no time to think up what they would do.

The cowmen had discouraged the business of supplying mine camp and smelter town with meat stolen from the outlying pastures. Already they were starting herds back over the mountain pass into the Blizzard Basin, very unparticular as to what the markings on the animals were. All the cows in the *Malpais* would not make up for the drain which had been made on their herds in these recent peaceable years when they had imported, at enormous cost, deep-bodied bulls and prize stock heifers to get their herds into the prime beef market.

Roused, the cattle ranchers riding in a big posse met no resistance. They were after their own—that was all. They proposed to leave the nesters, homesteaders, squatters of the Bad Lands with the impression that the big brands would better be left alone. They didn't know exactly what to do with Cusaka's estate. Some were for burning it up. Others reckoned they would better just take possession of the curious brand mangler, with the boxful of chewed out hieroglyphics, as evidence for the sundry courts, criminal and civil, to deal with. It was a tidy little property, and the receiver of stolen goods was not only dead, but his estate might as well be divided up among those from whose property it had been filched.

The cattlemen found a city marshal, a couple of deputy sheriffs and two or three constables. The visitors talked in a language the village police understood. Everything would be all right, sure. And then the tired riders sent word back to their fellows, who were naturally anxious to know how things were going. And the word was entirely satisfactory.

Holbrinn sent the message:

We done tapped the leak right plumb up to the head!

THUS it happened that Put Dartley, picking up a newspaper while he awaited a square meal to top off a long day's exertions on top of dragging a thief-lair, came upon a headline which was of general interest throughout the meat growing country:

SHEEPMEN CATCH THIEVES

HEAD OFF STOLEN BAND AND
KILL STEALERS WHO
DON'T GIVE UP

BERT RUDABON ACCUSED OF
KILLING SHEPHERD
WITH A .38

And in the account of the heading of the band of stolen sheep up in the pass, the newspaper made plain what the sheepmen believed. At the same time, in fairness characteristic of reporters, the paper gave, verbatim, Bert Rudabon's story that the shepherd, Poletro, had sold out his employers at one dollar a head, and then had helped shape up the sheep for the stolen band so the thieves could drive it on their way the more readily in the storm which was pouring down. Then Poletro had left his own two dogs with the discarded sheep of his flock while he helped drive the loot up the slope in the cloudburst on the way that morning of the raid.

The newspaper, however, added Manager Nathan Lustrole's comment:

> "That's all nonsense. I could see Poletro's tracks in the mud, where he followed the sheep band. And when we found his body, he had his revolver in his hand, from which he had fired two shots, showing that he was running to save his band, as a good sheepman would. And he gave his life against Rudabon's own shooting, for we found the jacketed .38 automatic bullet in the dead shepherd's clothes."

Of course, the account described in much detail the ambuscade of the sheep stealers in the pass, signs of which the cattlemen had found. Mike Pirqual had been killed there, and that accounted for his hat lying crumpled in the mud, trampled, too, by the passing of the sheep which were turned back toward the dead shepherd's two-wheel covered wagon camp.

As Put Dartley, in a clear, rather low spoken voice, read aloud the whole story, column after column, the cattlemen ignored the call to supper and they grunted, shortly, when on the editorial page Put found a paragraph of comment which declared:

> The unfortunate affair back in the breaks, at the north end of our country, will probably give rise to wild accounts about the state of civilization in this region, where there are as law abiding citizens as are found anywhere in the world. The prompt capture of the stolen band and the bringing to jail of the survivor of the outlaws, to be tried amid the orderly populace, with his every right carefully guarded, is exceedingly significant; for did the Old West still survive, of course he would have been strung up on the nearest convenient limb. The shepherds are to be congratulated on their great restraint, especially when they. found the faithful-unto-death Poletro.

Put Dartley folded the newspaper and put it into his pocket, remaining seated on the clerk's desk as his fellow cattlemen went into the hotel dining room, their appetites hearty after a good job well on its way to completion.

"Well, they'll hang Rudabon now," someone remarked. "He's been needing it for quite a while. A regular killer—bad."

"Bad—" Put Dartley repeated to himself, under his breath.

With all the thoughtlessness of youth, thinking it great fun to embarrass and haze a shy and awkward schoolmate from the big cattle pasture, Bert Rudabon and his gang had grown up into further invasions of the rights of their fellows. They were cattle thieves, sheep stealers . . . And now some were dead. Others were fugitives. The cattlemen were already combing the country where they had scattered their loot. They had killed their meat-buying fence, Cusaka, the butcher.

"I could keep still," Dartley mused grimly. "Course—if I were that kind . . . But doggone . . . Those sheepmen! I'm a cattleman. If I go horning in . . . Um-m. I reckon I better go eat."

He went into the big hotel dining room. He paused at the doorway to look across those tables where were his fellow ranchers and their top hands.

"Course," he mused, "they'd go down with me—get me fair play. But—likely they'd say something and start hell a-raising. 'Taint right—starting another war like that when—when dad and Old Spark and so many others got killed up . . . ."

"Better sit in," a voice hailed. "No tellin' how long the beef'll last—less'n you want to eat mutton!"

There was a laugh, and Put took a seat to eat with the men who had not removed their belts to sit down. Not expecting any friends of the butcher would start anything, but at the same time, not taking any chances.

CHAPTER X

VINDICATION

AFTER having had his meal, Put Dartley announced to the cattlemen that he reckoned he'd better go down to Piebald to tell the sheriff about the cattlemen's doings. The killing of Cusaka and the round-up of the cattle across the *Malpais* country was sure, he said, to make a lot of talk; so the cattlemen would better start talking first. That was good sense, and it was suggested they would better make up a party of cattlemen. To that Put objected.

"It'd look like we were ready for things," he said. "If they want witnesses, course we'll all testify, pronto. I've been kinda riding up front, and the Bar Question ought to face the music——"

"That's so. That outfit can sure be heard all over when it whispers," someone remarked, and there was a laugh.

"Take yo' horse down an' ride up from the station plumb stylish!" Holbrinn suggested, and that seemed a good idea.

Accordingly, when the combination freight and passenger train started down to Piebald in the morning, the cattlemen saw their messenger on his way, giving him a good cheer. Dartley watched the mine town station disappear around a curve as the train wound down the tortuous track. The way was clear and the train arrived safely on the main line at the Piebald station.

There was a lot of curiosity at Piebald as to what had actually taken place away back up there in the back country of the mountains and Bad Lands. Word had gone around that the cattlemen were sending down a messenger, and quite a little crowd had gathered out at the railroad station. They saw Put Dartley lead his horse out of the baggage car onto the platform, where he mounted and rode down the incline heading on the roadway toward the courthouse, which was in the square a mile from the station.

Townsfolk walked and quite a few sheepmen rode after Put, as well as two deputy sheriffs who had gone to meet him as an escort due the representative of the cattle men. Just greetings were passed. The cowman rode leaning forward, his shoulders humped a bit like an eagle's, looking straight ahead. Yet his sharp eyes noted on the way the straight-backed, rather short-stirruped, sheepmen on their horses. He had become so accustomed to his rifle and revolver that he wore them now regardlessly. The sheepmen, naturally, hadn't been disarmed. The town was all sheep, too. Looked it—smelled it, for that matter, so many shepherds and sheepfold folk were in out of the pastures.

Straight to the courthouse square Put led the procession. He let fall his long reins at the tie rail and swung down to climb the four steps to the walk which sloped up to the big county building. There was a crowd assembled, sensible of the portents of important things. They did not put foot on the walk, though, and Put, with the two deputies just behind him, clumped on his high heels, looking straight ahead. On either side of him were the expressionless faces of a throng of sheepmen, their eyes aglitter because one of their own had been killed as he followed his stolen sheep.

Dartley ran up the balcony steps, headed straight into the big corridor and turned to the right into the office of Sheriff Gaylord who was the first man—the only one of the people in the office—that he really saw. Gaylord rose heavily to his feet to greet him.

"My name's—" the cattleman began.

"Put Dartley of the Bar Question," the sheriff took his words. "Shake . . . Heard you were coming. Jerry Holbrinn telephoned in you'd be down to give us the straight of those things up in the Bad Lands. Cusaka killin' your cattle, finding the stolen brands, a lot of sheep, too—and so on."

"And so on—'specially," Put Dartley followed up, gravely. "I read about the sheep band in the Piebald *Information*. Did it tell the story right?"

"Oh, yes! Everything exactly as it is," Gaylord replied enthusiastically.

"We came into the pass. Found where the sheep had been turned back there . . . Picked up Mike Pirqual's hat in the sand . . . Wondered what'd happened," Dartley said. "Downtown, last night, we read the paper. That was after we found a lot of our hides in Cusaka's abattoir. He had a machine there to mangle the brands, so's the skin would look dog-chewed, you know. He'd burned the patches in quick lime in a pit. He started in violent when he saw he was caught, swung his cleaver as he jumped . . . Poor judgment, that. Got stopped in the air when he leaped. Ten-twelve witnesses to it."

"Self-defense then?" Gaylord inquired.

"I expect we'll all plead that," Put nodded. "I was there, well up front, Sheriff. I was among those that pulled in first—naturally! That was a big cleaver . . . Looked mighty wicked. But I was looking at the machine. Didn't see the shooting, myself. Seemed coming to him."

"It would. I've been expecting Cusaka'd get into trouble, sometime . . . Big as a bull!" The sheriff nodded. "Fact is, my attention was drawn to those torn hides he was shipping—sometime since. Had my eye on him . . . How come you cattlemen went riding, Put?"

"I came down to tell that," Put said, refusing to sit down. "I found our herds were thinning down below reasonable expectations. I knew—we cattlemen all knew—that something was wrong. I was restless, and was over on the head of Lingual Creek when the cloudburst came. It was a warm storm, and in the night my horse snuffled up. I knew somebody was going by. I rode down and, sure enough, I crossed into the smell of wet cattle. A bunch had just gone through. There was no wind. I followed the best I could. Fast—too fast, I expect. Anyhow, I run out the scent."

"Course, you had men with you?" Gaylord asked.

"Oh, no. I was riding line——"

"You mean to say you alone followed a bunch of cattle *moving*—being moved?"

"Yes."

There was a stir among the listeners. The deputies, undersheriff and sheriff, as well as the background of immobile countenanced sheep folk, ran their eyes over the tall, rather lean representative of the cattle raisers.

"Well, go on," Gaylord suggested, respectfully.

"I swung back into the scent, but it was beating down fast in the rain, and I lost it again. I circled—" Dartley hesitated. "I wasn't just sure of where I was—over east of Lingual Creek, you know. Sheep pasture—so I wouldn't know the minor details of the lie of the land. I was working up to the pass, though—I could tell they were headed that way. I figured I was too far over and swung back. First I knew I was right smack up to a band of sheep—probably a thousand—goats leading them."

"Shu—sho!" breaths exploded round about, and even the sheep folk grew taut, the skins of their faces drawing ever so little, their eyes setting.

"Yes?" Gaylord inquired, softly.

"I was on foot, leading my horse in the mud—both of us pretty tired, of course—" Dartley obviously hesitated. "The band went bobbing by, shaking the rain out of their eyes, going into the wind which was springing down the grade. Plenty of lightning and daylight to see by. I saw a man coming and knowed he was a sheep herder account of his staff and the way he was working along the flank. I didn't savvy his driving them in that storm. He was up right close—twelve-fifteen yards—when he looked up and saw me. I'd seen him before. Couldn't remember where. He went for his gun, pulled and let go at me . . . And I killed him."

"What!" every listener cried out, the sheriff starting to his feet in wide mouthed astonishment, blinking.

"Yes, sir, he was plumb scairt, seeing me, but he got his gun first, missed—and I got him," Dartley said.

Then there was a commotion over on the right of the office and one who had been standing on a chair thrust a way through to the desk where Dartley stood.

"Do you mean to say you killed *my* sheep herder?" a cold, sharp feminine voice demanded, and Put Dartley turned to find himself face to face with June Spark.

Beads of sweat gathered on his brow and on his set features, which whitened in places, darkened red in others.

"Yes, Miss Spark," he nodded. "He drew first. He shot first. Beat me to the draw, missed—and then I got 'im."

She stood white and furious. Yet her face not distorted, just her eyes blazing in the impassive calmness of expression of the generations of those who raise and guard their sheep.

"You killed my shepherd?" She surveyed him, and around her stood her own people—ready. Sheriff Gaylord and his deputies sprang up and back, their guns drawn, also ready.

Her eyes turned to Put Dartley's wide belt and outflaring holster with its huge ivory handled revolver, the frame of an old time .45, Frontier model Colt's.

"Put Dartley," she curled her lips scornfully, pointing at the big revolver, "you lie. Poletro was killed with a .38 caliber automatic jacketed projectile. Yours is an old black powder .45. Your father's I expect."

Dartley reached under his left arm, drew forth a .38 Colt's automatic and laid it on the table.

"I'd been practicing more with this than with the .45. My father's old gun, that's so," he answered. "When Poletro went for his gun I grabbed the .38. Naturally, account of being more used to it. I had always expected if I had to draw for business, I'd use the .45, but somehow I just plumb forgot it."

"Look here, *Mister* Dartley," Manager Lustrole interposed. "Why do yo' reckon Poletro 'lowed to kill you?"

"I don't know anything about that," Dartley shook his head. "I was looking for stolen cattle, a bunch being run off in the night. I was ready for anything. The sheep kinda threw me off my guard."

"Did you see anyone else besides Poletro?" June Spark asked.

"No. Just dogs racing by, working the sheep, the way they do." Dartley shook his head. "Poletro, I reckon, would have seen me before, but he jumped out and bent one of the flock back into the line——"

"That's so. Yes, suh, that's so!" Lustrole exclaimed, as though talking to himself. "I saw those tracks. I ought to have known he was *helping* drive those sheep!"

"Then—then—" June turned to Lustrole. She would believe her own people.

"Hit's so!" Lustrole nodded, staring at the desk. "Poletro was a traitor."

"Rudabon didn't kill him, then?" Gaylord interposed.

"It looks like," the young woman shook her head.

"Go bring him in!" Gaylord ordered. "Let's get the straight of this! He's claimed all along he had no reason for killing that sheep herder. That the joke's on him."

"You're friendly with Rudabon—you came to help *him* out?" June turned to Dartley, as they waited.

"Why—no!" He shook his head, emphatically.

"Because he was stealing sheep—working with the cattle rustlers, too?" she pressed.

"No." He shook his head, bluntly. "I wasn't friendly with him."

"You didn't have to tell!" she suggested, her face expressionless.

"Nobody is going to be punished for any killing of mine," Dartley replied. "Rudabon's got enough to answer for without having that killing laid against him."

"You had to prove you were justified. It wasn't going to be easy," she remarked. "I doubted your word."

"I expected—I couldn't help that," he nodded. "I don't quit things because they're hard——"

"No?" she looked at him.

For an instant he gazed at her, and then caught her meaning. Bert Rudabon had made it too hard for him to go on with his education. Now he had come and saved Rudabon from the gallows by taking a killing blame, with all it might lead to, on his own shoulders. Dartley flinched, looking away.

"Well—I don't quit things any more," he amended, and covering his confusion he addressed the sheriff. "I've no use personally for Rudabon . . . We've rounded up three-four thousand head of cattle in the *Malpais* country, including a lot of misbranded calves and high bred young stock. We've herded up some witnesses who've all talked right much. There's a lot of sheep back in some of the holes and up the draws, too. A lot of nesters, squatters and homesteaders—poor whites—are in there, ready to tell what they know. Rudabon came in there about three years ago, when he was run out of Cut Fence. If we'd caught him, I expect we'd hung him. Not for killing a sheep herder, though, but for rustling cows——"

"The idea!" June Spark bristled indignantly.

A burst of laughter relieved the tension.

"Rudabon claimed right along that he didn't do it. Said, of course he didn't expect anyone'd believe him, though," Gaylord remarked.

"Poletro always did have a lot of money," Lustrole added. "Twice before, his flocks came in thin, same as some of the other shepherds. But he claimed he didn't know what was the matter. He was four hundred shy last year and three hundred the year before. This time he'd been a thousand shy. He was a good man. He could handle three thousand easy."

A minute later Rudabon walked in, his leg irons clinking as he took short steps. He stood, with his handcuffed hands in front of him, tall, handsome, head up, defiant as he looked around. His eyes, bright and gem clear, met the slate-gray blue of Dartley's own eyes. He flinched then, looking away.

"I got that knife, yet," he mumbled. "Now I'm caught—right."

"Rudabon," Gaylord asked, "when you were driving those sheep did you hear any shooting?"

"What's the use, sheriff? I've told you all I know!" Rudabon exclaimed impatiently.

"There's a lot of use," the sheriff said sharply. "It's the difference between going to jail for stealing sheep and being hung for murdering sheep herders."

"About the same on a man's feelings." Rudabon shrugged his shoulders, and even the sheep folk smiled.

"Suppose we had a witness in that second sheep herder killing?" Gaylord asked.

Rudabon turned to look at the cattleman, an expression of wonder on his features. Then he dropped his gaze to the desk in embarrassment, discovering the .38 Colt's automatic for the first time. He leaned over with an audible gasp. That wasn't his .38! Written in acid script on the receiver, he read:

Putnam Dartley

"That isn't the gun Sandstorm Watson gave you, Rudabon," the sheriff observed. "Same kind, though. And it killed Poletro no doubt of it!"

Rudabon sagged, recovering himself only with utmost will power. He could with a bravado smile face certain hanging. He had always smiled genially. Now he didn't. His lips twitched, but not upward at the corners.

"About Lopaz Wisnomore, Rudabon?" Gaylord suddenly snapped.

"Mike Pirqual . . . Wisnomore was heading us. That dog of his, too, was scattering the sheep, breaking up the band. I wasn't along that night. I was out after cattle in that storm . . . I wouldn't shoot a man without an even break, anyhow."

Rudabon turned a sidelong gaze of wonderment at Dartley. The stalwart young cowman must have known Rudabon was in on all the cattle stealing. The prisoner never in his life had played fair, except in killings. The man he had cheated, bullied and robbed had refused as a boy to prosecute for raiding the cabin, and now was saving a sheep thief's neck from the gallows.

Rudabon weakened visibly and someone shoved a chair so he sank into it, knuckling his eyes with his fists, breaking down. He was receiving no more than justice—when he expected hanging.

"Sheriff," he turned with wet cheeks, "this man here—Dartley—he's treated me mighty white. And it's made no difference that I treated him to a lot of dirt. I'll plead guilty—now. I'll tell all I know."

Dartley backed away, badly embarrassed. He felt an arm hooking gently into his, and looking down he discovered the beautiful hand and forearm of June Spark, her fingers reached to clasp cribwise through his.

THEN the two strolled forth through a quickly and tactfully opened lane, while the others gathered around the table to take up the problem of shaping down the scattered sheep and cattle loot in the Bad Land country east of the Palette Mountains.

"You know," June presently reminded Dartley, "those friends of mine I spoke to you about? They're really coming this summer, and they're so anxious to see cattle country, cattlemen—as though cows were so much more interesting than sheep!"

"I've learned a lot about sheep that's sure good to know," he grinned.

"Well, you've taught me something, too," she mused. "You've no idea how it hurts about Poletro. Mistronio—he was straightaway, faithful to the end. I'd rather lose a whole band of sheep in a catastrophe than save them at the expense of one of our shepherds going wrong. Well—human nature, I suppose."

"I reckon so!" he said, nodding.

Going nowhere in particular, the sheep girl and the cattleman walked together. Sheep growers, managers, herders were scattering again around town, and they gazed with just the least of smiles and the most sparkling of eyes at the couple wandering along. The two came to a store front with a magazine rack along both windows and leading back into the entrance. June paused to look into one periodical while Dartley on beyond stood looking into another which was upside down.

Suddenly an enthusiastic and dapper man emerged from the store, in his shirt sleeves, and caught the cattleman by the hand.

"Why, howdy, *Mister* Dartley!" he cried. "Say, you know, there's been people writing in and trying to find out about those books you sent out to the Spark sheep outfit. Somebody in just yesterday. But, you know, I never said a word——"

"Gosh!" Dartley exploded, and the book merchant choked as he turned, with widened eyes and opened mouth, to look at the young woman he had not, in his delight, noticed.

"*So!*" the young woman said, tipping her head, eyeing those two dashed culprits.

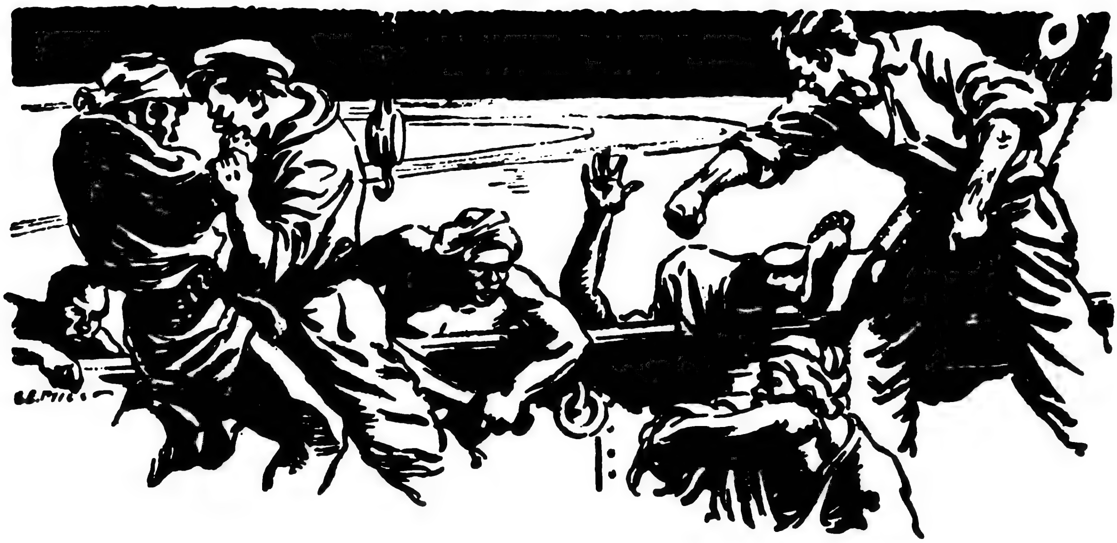
"Now, *say!*" the book store man turned to Dartley. "I didn't mean to——"

"Don't you worry a bit about losing his business!" the girl said, with a certain tartness and far greater meaning than she realized. "I'll see that he——"

Then she stopped short. Dartley was staring at her, absorbing that declaration which could mean only utmost proprietorship. She hadn't intended yet to——

"June!" Dartley stepped forward, his high heeled boots clumping. He caught her up and enfolded her in his arms.

"We-e-e!" she whispered.



The PARTNERS

A Rousing Yarn of Illicit Yankee Cargoes in the Caribbean

By HENRY LACOSSITT

BUCK KNIGHT was almost broke. He contemplated this fact as he stood at a bar in Greenpoint. He had been over in Manhattan, but thirst and a nostalgia for the left bank of the East River, with which he was more familiar than the Hudson, had urged him aboard a Twenty-third Street ferry and sent him to Brooklyn. Now he stood eyeing the sad array of bottles on the dingy buffet as he hooked his elbows over the bar and sipped a beer. The beer was only fair. Which probably had something to do with Buck's melancholy state of mind.

Outside, the night was dirty. A fog, pungent with the acrid redolence of the harbor, floated up the river and seeped into the tawdry saloon. It made the beer taste worse. Buck reflected that he had but six dollars and thirty-three cents left. And no place to go. He looked at the bartender, a sour looking individual named Pete, who, besides himself, was the only present occupant of the place.

"Pete," said Buck, "this is one hell of a life."

The bartender sighed. It was. There were not many ships at anchor.

"Pete, if——"

Buck's statement halted abruptly.

From the street came a raucous roar. It was followed by a fusillade of curses that, after the blast that preceded them, sounded like a chorus of chirps. And then came sounds of struggle.

At the raucous roar Buck set his stein down so violently that the beer was splashed over on the counter. He stood tense. The bartender looked questioningly. From the sidewalk outside came more curses and now and then that roar of mighty rage. Buck's eyes shone with anticipation. He wheeled around, the stein in his hand.

"Pete," he said, "there ain't but one guy on the seven seas can holler like that."

Then, still holding the stein, and followed by the bartender, he rushed to the door, and out of the saloon.

On the sidewalk five men were fighting. Four of them fought the fifth. The fifth, a tremendous man with a crop of fiery red hair, was backed against the outside wall of the saloon. He flailed furiously, his great arms and huge hands keeping the four at bay. Now and then he stepped out and aimed a blow. But the four were wary. They sensed the strength in those big arms, and tney fought cautiously. And each time the fifth advanced, the four tried to encircle him, which forced him to retreat until his back again was at the saloon wall.

Buck watched the lone fighter with fascinated eyes. He stood in the gloom by the door of the saloon, still holding the stein of beer. The bartender had fled inside and put out the lights, fearing the police, but Buck did not notice. He was oblivious to everything but that fight. For that lone fighter was his chief interest in life. That lone fighter was Red Murdock.

Buck sat down on the saloon stoop and laughed. At the sound the five fighters turned. Buck had a rather compelling voice himself and he had laughed in earnest. Red saw him and stood as if grown to the sidewalk. His massive face relaxed in sheer amazement. An inarticulate rumble issued from his throat. Finally he found his voice.

"You!" he said.

"Me!" said Buck.

Smack!

The four fighters were not much interested in Buck. One of them caught the amazed and bewildered Red on the end of his abused nose. It brought the blood streaming, and they rushed him. For a moment there was a furious scramble, but Red gained the saloon wall again, and the fight reached its former deadlock.

"Haw, haw!"

Buck laughed until tears started from his hard blue eyes. He held up the stein of beer.

"Have a drink, Red," he said, "and take it easy. Remember Colombia? Here's to ya!"

Buck lifted the stein and drank.

But Red did not reply. He heard, and cursed, but he dared not give Buck any attention. The going was rough. The four fighters were not small men, themselves. Husky seamen, each, they were used to brawling, and they were giving Red the fight of his life.

"Have a . . . ."

Buck's taunt died as one of the seamen caught Red a vicious blow on the jaw and sent him staggering. Buck started from the stoop. He remained crouched for a moment, but Red regained his balance and drove back his antagonists. Buck relaxed again.

He did not, however, laugh now. He watched keenly. He saw Red in a sore plight, and he grew tense again. He crouched. He sipped the last of his beer slowly. Suddenly, as a rush of the seamen bore Red back against the wall, he flung away the glass and sprang.

Right in the middle of the mêlée he landed, his big arms ramming and clubbing. And as he sprang, he yelled.

"Stay with 'em, Red! Here I come!"

And come, he did. Again Red's roar sounded, but this time it was in triumph. He saw Buck's leap and his own coincided with it. Together they plunged into the four seamen; and no four men could stand up against that pair.

THE seamen retreated. One went down—and stayed down. Another lit in the gutter and lay there, his face battered and bloody. A third, caught by Red's flying fist, smashed into the saloon wall with awful force and slithered to the walk in a heap. The fourth started to run, but Buck tripped him. Leaping upon the man, Buck picked him up and held him, kicking, under one arm.

"Red," said Buck, "he's been bad. Spank him!"

And Red did. His hamlike hand thwacked gain and again. The man yelled. Red looked at Buck; Buck looked at Red. Buck dropped the struggling seaman. The man fell flat on his face, scrambled to his feet, and tore down the street.

Red and Buck stepped toward each other and shook hands.

"Where the devil did you come from?" said Red.

"Hell and back," said Buck. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"Same place. What you doin' here?"

"Nothin'. What're you?"

"Just that. Let's have a drink. You have one on me."

"An' then you one on me."

"O-kay."

They went into the saloon. The bartender turned on the lights and they had a drink.

"Red," said Buck, "what was the argument?"

"Nothin' much. I busted one o' them guys wide open once over in Gib, an' he thought he'd jump me when he had his friends. Say—how'd you git back from Syria?"

"Got picked up by a Greek packet an' shipped to Plymouth. Then I shipped here. Where's the *Tropic?*"

Red studied the bar for a moment. Then he looked up at Buck.

"Gone."

"Where?"

"Confiscated. They caught us comin' an' goin' just south o' Beirut, an' we pulled off in boats an' left her. The crew scattered an' I come home on a British tanker. Ain't that hell?"

"Ain't it?"

They were silent, then, as they thought of other days.

"Have one on me, Red," said Buck.

They drank again.

"Red," said Buck, "I'm broke."

"So'm I."

"What'll we do?"

Red studied a minute.

"I know a skipper," he said, "runnin' machinery to Santos. He needs two mates, he says."

They argued that for a while. It was dull, but they were broke. They decided it was the only thing to do.

"Let's have another, Pete," said Buck.

"Have one on the house," said Pete.

"O-kay," in duet.

They drank again, whisky chased with beer. Pete leaned over his bar as several men came in.

"Say," he whispered huskily, "you boys want a job?"

They did. Pete jerked his head.

"Come into the back room."

Pete led them out of the barroom and through a passageway to a door. Behind the door they heard two men talking. Pete knocked.

"Who is it?" The voice was deep and cold.

"Pete."

The door opened. As it did, a man stepped out. His head was down, but both Red and Buck caught sight of his features as he walked past them. He was large, with long dangling arms and an ambling walk. His face, in the dull light of the back room which shone through into the dark corridor, was lean and sharp, and his eyes gleamed. He ambled past them and up into the barroom. Red and Buck turned to the other occupant of the back room.

He was seated. Beneath a sea captain's cap they saw the face of a middle-aged man. The face was deeply lined and expressionless. Its mouth was a closed slit. Above the mouth was a long nose, slightly hooked. On either side of the nose, and just above it, were a pair of green eyes. They were remarkable eyes, intelligent and cold. Above them were black brows. And black hair fringed from beneath the visored cap.

"Boys," said Pete, "this is Captain Wall. They call him 'Stony Wall'." Pete turned and left, closing the door.

Captain Wall studied them a moment. Then he smiled—a bleak smile.

"Well," said Red, "what's the jobs?"

"First and second mates on my ship."

"Regular pay?"

"No."

Red and Buck looked at each other.

"You're paid," said Captain Wall, "out o' what my packet makes."

"What you runnin'?" asked Red.

"Rum."

"Oh!" in duet.

"O-kay?" asked Captain Wall.

They both looked at him for a moment. The green eyes looked back and the thin lips smiled.

"O-kay," they answered in unison.

"When do we sail?" asked Buck.

"Tomorrow morning at six."

"Where is she?"

They were told. They left the saloon and went out into the foggy night. They found the ship, the *S. S. Emerald,* just above the Williamsburg Bridge, and, presenting the credentials given them by Wall, went aboard. They found their cabins and then went up on the ship's bridge.

Across the river, Manhattan glowed and seethed like a monstrous lake of fire that spewed up buildings whose lighted windows were like fountains of sparks. A tug bawled. The city groaned. Above them, invisible in the fog, traffic rattled. They were silent as they watched. And they thought as they were silent.

"Well," said Buck finally, "watcha think?"

"Watch him," said Red. "He's a crook."

"Hell," said Buck, "you ain't no lily yourself."

An hour later they were asleep.

TWO days after, the *S. S. Emerald*, with Red as first mate and Buck as second, rode south just inside the Gulf Stream, bound for Cuba. Long and graceful, she was, painted a grayish-green, a well-decker of some eight thousand tons. She was loaded with machinery for Santiago. From there she would cruise east along the coast to Guantanamo Bay, where, within sight of the United States Naval Reservation, she would load, at the dirty little tropic port of Caimanera, a cargo of liquor for rum row off the Jersey capes.

Red relieved Buck at four in the morning of the third day. They were just below Hatteras. They looked at each other and laughed.

Strange men, they were, wanderers and outlaws of the seas. For years they had been traditional rivals, best enemies, and worst friends. They had plied the Caribbean, where Red, several years before, after a bitter rivalry, had, by a clever ruse, put Buck in the clutches of the Coast Guard for rum running off Florida. Buck served two years in the Federal penitentiary at Atlanta. Then he gravitated to Havana, where he met Red. They fought on sight, for their feud had been bitter. But they also had missed each other and their natures were strange; so they threw in together. They sailed to the Levant, where they ran guns to Syria.

But their partnership soured, for Red was master of their vessel, the *Tropic*. Buck tried to double-cross Red, more or less on principle. That he did not succeed was simply due to his strange nature, which rebelled at the deed. He left Red and the *Tropic* safe in the port of Alexandretta. They had not seen each other since.

They laughed. Their jumbled countenances split into great grins, and their huge bodies shook. They were hard men, by most lights, unscrupulous men, but they were men of humor. And the humor of their present situation did not escape them. They were enjoying each other. And they had found, aboard the *Emerald*, several members of their old crews who had drifted back from the world's fringes.

Buck lingered, after Red relieved him. They were silent a long time after their laughter, as they stood outside on the flying bridge and watched dawn grow out of the eastern sea. The ship leaped easily, speedily, on her southerly course.

"Red," said Buck, "we'd meet in hell."

"Yeah," said Red. "Funny, ain't it?"

"Ain't it? I 'spect we will, at that."

They both turned as a figure ascended the ladder from the bridge deck and approached them. It was Captain Stony Wall. He walked through the morning twilight and stopped beside them. He lit a cigaret and his green eyes shone in the light of the match. Heavy with sleep, they looked as if they had been set in their sockets by a jeweler. Wall asked them a few questions, went inside to look at the course in the wheelhouse, and went downstairs again.

"Buck," said Red, "watch that sailor."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I don't like his face. An' who was that loose lookin' guy with him at Pete's?"

"Hell," said Buck, and went down to his cabin.

They reached Santiago six days later, and, after two days and a night, in which they discharged the machinery, they left with a small cargo in No. 3 hatch for New York. But they did not go to New York. They slipped out of the jug-shaped harbor and stole along the coast to the east. After a few hours sailing they reached Guantanamo Bay, and entered, coming to anchor off little Caimanera, a few miles across from the naval base.

The little town, a slough of lethargy and filth, was unwontedly active. Rarely indeed was it visited by large commercial ships, and only since the Eighteenth Amendment had it seen any at all. Now, with the visit of the *Emerald*, which called regularly, it buzzed.

Clumsy lighters, loaded with cases of whisky and rum put out from shore and trundled awkwardly alongside the ship, where they were made fast with hawsers. Aboard them, half naked negroes, jabbering a patois that included Spanish, English, French, and fragments of some far African dialect, roped the cases which were hoisted in groups of eight and ten and set within the holds of the *Emerald*.

For three days the work went on, and for three days, Buck, aft, and Red, forward, bossed the job, swearing mightily, and maintaining a terrific pace that caused black bodies to glisten and white seamen to pant and blow. Above, on his bridge, Captain Wall cast an appraising eye, now and then, and talked to Peñatez, the shipper.

Peñatez was a tall Cuban with distinct traces of negro blood and a shrewd face. He was a power around Caimanera. Living in a large house beyond the outskirts of the town, he owned several plantations and mahogany forests, the labor for which was procured by agents across the Windward Passage in Haiti. It was little more than slave labor, but Peñatez became rich on it, and, as he became rich, he became powerful. His men served him faithfully and he kept a large group of servants at his house. With the rise of rum running he had added to his activities, and his wealth had swollen considerably.

Toward evening of the third day he and Captain Wall went ashore, Wall leaving orders to work through until the lighters were clean and the holds full.

About seven, with only a few lighters remaining—due to the pace they had maintained—Red went aft to Buck.

"Hey," he said, "this scow's about to clear, an' we ain't had a snort."

"Right," said Buck. "Some time since I was ashore in this dump. Let's go."

And they did, leaving the third mate and the bos'n—one of Buck's old crew, named Wicks—at the posts they had just quit.

THEY were rowed to the rotting little jetty and walked up to the street that skirts the sad waterfront of Caimanera. They avoided the cluster of cafés that wait to ensnare the traveler who ventures off the jetty, and threaded their massive ways back toward the station that is a terminus of a branch of the Cuban railway. It was a district of squalor and tropic decay, but, nestled there, they knew they would find better rum for less money.

They were jovial. In dungarees and blue shirts, and bareheaded, vagabonding again, they were once more themselves. They proceeded until they came to a little cantina almost at the edge of town. There they halted and, brushing aside the dirty carpet that served as a door, entered. The place, familiar from other days, was not imposing with its dirty floor, its three half-caste women, its parrot and monkey, and its villainous looking barkeep; but they knew that the Bacardi served here was the best.

They ordered *daiquiris* and settled themselves. They talked, and they drank, and they talked. They had been there perhaps an hour, when they heard voices outside. One of them was the voice of their captain, and the other that of a Cuban, by its accent. They looked, questioningly.

"Roberto," said Red to the villainous looking barkeep, "does anybody live out this way beyond the town?"

"*Si, Capitan Murdock,*" said Roberto, "Señor Peñatez has his house over the hill."

The evening wore on, and Buck and Red became mellow. They agreed that it was very nice to be back together again. And they thought that Roberto's *daiquiris* were the best they ever had tasted. This, they brought to Roberto's attention quite often. Likewise, Roberto's two hundred pound wife received many flattering compliments and Red bought her a dozen sacks of peanuts from a passing vendor.

About midnight, however, their mellowness began to fade. They reminded each other quite caustically of the years past, and of the triumphs and defeats experienced by each in their dealings with each other. Roberto, who knew them, began to look uneasy, and his wife, with her many pounds and her one sack of peanuts, retired before the coming storm.

They were in the midst of a steaming argument that held possibilities, when they bit their words abruptly and stiffened. From over the hill in the direction of Peñatez' house they heard a shout. It was carried on the warm wind, and it was ominous, for it was a shout of rage. They were silent. A minute passed. Then, in the distance, they heard a man running. He was coming closer. They jumped to their feet and made for the door. They pulled aside the carpet just after their captain had passed, speeding toward the waterfront.

" 'S a fire, maybe," said Red.

"Maybe a fight," said Buck.

"Like hell," said Red. " 'S a foot race. Look!"

Over the hill came another figure, running furiously. It was Peñatez. Also he was shouting at the top of his voice. He was followed by a number of men—laborers about his house. They were all screeching and yelling. When Peñatez reached the faint patch of light cast by an oil lamp above Roberto's door, Red and Buck saw that his face was bleeding.

"Hey!" yelled Red. "Hey! Whass all the shootin' for?"

Peñatez stopped and turned. He saw the partners.

"Dogs!" he screamed, and, pointing, charged for them. His men followed him. And his men carried machetes.

There was a mahogany table by Roberto's door. Buck grabbed it. Peñatez lunged at Red, followed by his black laborers. Red grabbed the shipper with his left hand. With his right, he clubbed a fearful blow to the jaw. Peñatez collapsed. Red lifted him, as Buck lifted the table, and they threw both into the faces of the onrushing negroes. It halted the charge for a moment, and then, from the bay, came three thundering blasts. The *Emerald* was signaling!

The partners wheeled and ran. The blacks, followed by the staggering Peñatez, pursued, shouting and gesticulating. From the doors of grass huts and sprawling wooden shacks more negroes appeared. Peñatez' laborers shouted to the newcomers and pointed at the *Emerald*, and, by the time Red and Buck reached the waterfront, they were being pursued by a large mob of half savages armed with machetes and knives.

"What the hell's it all about?" shouted Red.

"How'n the name o' Gawd do I know?" shouted Buck.

But it was no time for conversation. They took one look behind them and waded into the water. Then, with long strokes, they started for the *Emerald*, as the mob took off in small boats. The swimmers were sighted from the deck, and the rope ladder, which had been drawn up, was let down again. They reached it, and started up, just as the foremost boat arrived alongside the ship. A giant negro stood up and swung with his machete at Red's leg. Red evaded the blow and kicked the man in the face, sending him overboard.

He reached the rail just behind Buck and vaulted over on the deck, but the negroes already were ascending the ladder. They scrambled up with simian agility. Red drew his immense pocket knife. The foremost black had just reached the top. Red sent him flying back with a blow in the face. Then he began to cut at the ropes of the ladder.

Buck joined him, and while Red sawed at the ropes, struck at the black faces that bobbed into view. The ones below saw what Red was about, and began scrambling down. But the ropes gave way and those on the ladder fell, screaming with fright, into the boat below, capsizing it.

The ship was in uproar. Seamen darted about like skeeters, and on the bridge, Wall, megaphone in hand, directed them.

"Hey!" roared Red. "What they hell's goin' on?"

"They're hijackin' me!" yelled Wall.

Red and Buck looked at each other. They laughed. Then they plunged to their posts, forward and aft.

Peñatez' men had scrambled up the anchor chain, and, with ropes attached to hooks, which caught on the rail, gained the deck in other places. But the seamen were on them. A revolver spat by the windlass and a negro went down. Red, standing there, grabbed the man and heaved him overboard. Then he took up the negro's machete. He called to several seamen and the windlass began to wind. The chain rumbled in the hawsepipe, and, as it did, the negroes on it dropped to the water. Wall, at the telegraph, signaled the black gang, and the *Emerald's* screws began to churn.

Buck, aft, had armed his men with crowbars, hammers, chains, anything that could be gleaned hurriedly from the machine shop. Some had revolvers, but he bellowed to them not to fire unless they had to. The fight about him, as with Red, forward, became a pitched battle.

But Red had the anchor up. With a machete he darted about the rail, and the boarding ropes fell to the water. The last of these disappeared, as the *Emerald*, already steaming ahead, began to gather speed.

The blacks left aboard fought for a while, but it could not last. Overwhelmed by the crew, they turned and dived overboard, or were knocked out, to be cast over the rail. Three had been killed. These were chucked with the rest.

Red and Buck, checking, found a number of seamen hurt, but none dead. Two had broken arms and many were cut. These were sent to the hospital next to the steering engine room, where the steward administered to them.

The rest of the crew washed down the decks and cleared away the remains of the fight, and the *Emerald* slipped out of the bay and into the Windward Passage.

The partners sought Captain Wall. They found him in the chartroom. He sat on a stool, working with compass and dividers, and as they entered, Red felt a hot stab of anger. Wall was clean and cool, and his expression was complacent. He had taken no part in the actual fight, and his clothes were as neat as when he had gone ashore. Red looked at his own and at Buck's. Theirs were blood-spattered and grimy, and both were bruised.

Wall looked up and saw them. He smiled and his green eyes shone with pleasure.

"That," he said, laying down his instruments, "is that. Have a drink?"

He poured three glasses of Bacardi.

"How," asked Red, "did it start?"

"Yeah, how?" said Buck.

"He tried to jack the price."

"The hell!" said Buck.

"Yeah, I went to his house to settle up an' have a drink. I started to pay. '*Capitan,*' he says, 'I have to ask more.' More meant almost double. I says, 'Hell, no!' An' the argument started. He said he'd come down an' unload the damned ship, if I didn't come across. I said for him to try it. Then he said he'd call all his niggers, an' made a pass at me, an' I bust him in the nose. Then I run."

There was more conversation, and Wall, leaving instructions as to the ship's course, went down to bed. It was Red's watch. He stepped out on the bridge with Buck.

"The dirty black shark!" said Buck, and went down to his cabin.

But Red, at ease against the wheelhouse as he watched morning rise over the sea, wondered.

A MONTH passed and back went the *Emerald* to the tropics. At the Straits of Florida, she swerved, and, running against the Gulf Stream, rounded Cuba and shot out into the Caribbean. She was not, however, going to Caimanera this trip.

But Wall was resourceful. He was heading for South America, bound for Cartagena with oil pipe, a full ship. There he had another source of supply, now that Peñatez was no longer available.

To the partners, of course, these were familiar waters. Before their disasters of recent years they had cruised here often. They knew them, perhaps, far better than their captain, but they said little. They were satisfied to be there once more, plying in adventurous trade and taking chances that thrilled their huge frames. Red still had misgivings about Stony Wall, but Buck did not share them. And Red, too, for that matter, was really content.

The Caimanera voyage had paid well. Peñatez, in his rage, had attempted to trip the *Emerald* by notifying the Coast Guard, but the ship had discharged her contraband unmolested and had procured her present cargo in the Chesapeake through friends of Wall's at Sparrow's Point. There the pipe had been loaded.

Business seemed good and the pockets of the partners were full of money; they were sailing in familiar waters; and the waters were calm. They were content.

The *Emerald* put into Puerta Colombia and discharged some pipe. A day there and she headed west, and, in little more than a night's sailing, cast anchor in the bay of Cartagena. The remainder of the pipe would be unloaded here, to be used in the construction of lines by American oil companies that were invading Colombia. The liquor, due to the watchful attitude of the American consulate, would have to be loaded at some point near, on the coast.

Once more Red and Buck were busy. The pipe was mean stuff to handle and the work was slow. Three days they labored and still the ship was not empty. And it was hot.

The almost equatorial sun shot searing rays at the crew and stevedores, and even the night did not bring relief. The city itself, almost devoid of real shade trees, and constructed largely of stone, adobe and cement, reflected the fierce heat during the day, but absorbed most of it, and retained it tenaciously at night. Back of the town and around the bay, the semidesert terrain seemed to curl under the blistering rays like scorched paper.

The natives, inured, did not notice it, but the crew panted, sweated, and murmured. Red and Buck swore, and stuck doggedly to their tasks, but Wall, watching, shrewdly decided to suspend work for a day. He needed his men, and he was in no hurry anyway. Consequently, there was, that night, a wholesale exodus from the ship going toward the town.

Buck and Red were in that exodus, in fact in front of it. With Wicks, the bos'n, they strode through the ancient gates and into the narrow, angular streets of the city. It was yet hot, but in a café it was comparatively cool, and they soothed their burning throats with cold Dutch *Muënchner*. They remained in town all evening, lost Wicks, and became delightfully drunk, engaging in two fights as allies, and having one themselves. But all was well again when they returned to the *Emerald* and to bed.

Next day they once more went to town and to the café where they had procured the good Dutch *Muënchner*. The crew were still scattered, enjoying their holiday, and there was nothing at the ship except Stony Wall, who was not very good company, and the radio operator, who stayed close to his shack or with the captain.

After a few beers at the café, Red became restless. He prevailed upon Buck and they went out into the street, holding to the shady side. They came to a little square, formally designed, in the center of which was an equestrian statue of Bolívar, and sat down in the shade of a coconut palm. Both were in ill humor from the night before and almost wilted with the heat.

"This is one hell of a town," said Red.

"Quit achin'," said Buck. "You been here before."

"Yeah, but I ain't never comin' again. My hair's singin'."

"Hell, that hair o' yours is already burnt."

There were more words, but nothing came of it as both were too hot to fight. They got up again. They sauntered down the street until they came to a massive stone structure. Red stopped. So Buck stopped, but stared listlessly down the street.

"What's that?" asked Red.

"That's a cathedral," said Buck.

"Let's go in."

"Hell, no."

"Come on, it'll be cool."

"To hell with it. I'm gonna get another beer."

"Well, I ain't. I'm goin' in."

"Go ahead," said Buck and walked off.

RED pushed the great door open. It creaked. He entered and looked around. It *was* cool—still and cool. The floor was of huge flagstones, and the earth between them was cold and moist. To the right, a worn and ancient stone stairway climbed stolidly to an open doorway. Red did not know it, but that doorway opened into a cloister. He shivered a little, due to the abrupt change of temperature, and strolled aimlessly about. In a pew a paper caught his eye, and he picked it up.

It was a pamphlet. He took it to a corner, where he sat down on a stone seat under a sputtering candle and read. It was in Spanish, but Red had sailed for years in the Caribbean. The pamphlet said that the cathedral was that of *San Pedro de Clayer,* canonized by the negroes centuries before for works of mercy among slaves, both African and Indian. Also, there was a request for a contribution. Red made a note that he would contribute. The candle above wavered out and left him in gloom. The gloom was soothing and the cavernlike coolness pleasant, and Red succumbed. He stretched out and dozed.

How long he dozed he did not know, but voices, subdued, but plainly audible in the hollow stillness of the cathedral, awakened him. He opened his eyes lazily and listened. Then he started. He knew one of those voices.

"Where are you?" it said. It was the voice of Captain Stony Wall.

"Six miles up the coast," answered a strange voice.

"When'd you get there?"

"Last night."

"Come to town?"

"No."

"Fine. My crew was around an' them two big mates."

"What'd you bring me to this place for?"

"Hell, Sims, d'ya think any o' that crew I got would look in at a cathedral?"

Red sat up silently and looked. Standing beside a pillar near the intersection of nave and transept were Wall and another man. The other man was large and stooped, with long dangling arms and sharp features. A candle, sputtering near by, sent a shaft of light at the man's little eyes, and they gleamed peculiarly. Red started again.

He knew that man! It was the man he and Buck had seen at Pete's, in Greenpoint, the night Wall hired them.

"Well, what's the dope?" asked Sims. "Did ya get away with it at Caimanera?"

"Sure," said Wall. "Never paid Peñatez a dime."

"Did he fight?"

"Did he! Gawd, ya should 'a' seen it. It was hell on wheels. Them two big mates, though, they handled it O. K."

"What'd ya tell the crew?"

"Told 'em I was bein' hijacked an' they fought like a bunch o' nuts."

Sims and Wall laughed. Red, hands clenched, started from his stone seat, swearing to himself. But he sat down again and listened.

"Well," said Sims, "where's my split o' the gravy from Caimanera?"

"Here," said Wall, and drew a sheaf of bills from his coat pocket and handed it to Sims. "Here's half o' what was left after I divvied the regular profit with the crew. You get that crew o' niggers in Domingo?"

"Yeah, an' they're scared to death. Do anything I or the mates tell 'em. Willin' as hell. Now what d'ya want me to do?"

"Listen. Take the *Principe* an' lay off just around the east point o' that cove up the coast. I'll be there an' out o' here in two days or so an' pick up the liquor. You keep out o' sight, o' course. I'll sail in two-three days from here—at night. My sparks'll signal you. He's O. K. I been givin' him lucre right along. Then you folla me, just out o' sight. I'll sail on up an' keep close to Florida. When we're about off Jupiter, I'll signal ya. You come up that night. The crew won't be lookin' for nothin'. Hold me up, come aboard, an' do your hijackin'. Tie me up if you want. Do anything, but make it look regular. That crew o' mine ain't no babies, ya know. Then I'll cruise on up an' meet ya in Brooklyn, an' we'll split."

"How about them two big mates? I heard about them. They'll fight, won't they?"

"Maybe. If they do, drill 'em."

Red rose halfway from the stone seat again, but he sat down and smiled. Sims and Wall left, then, first peering up and down the street. Red waited for some time and then followed them. As he left he suddenly remembered the pamphlet in his hand. He put it in his pocket and dropped a five dollar bill in a stone bowl next to the door. He was grateful.

He, too, peered up and down the street before going out. Sims and Wall were out of sight. He went out. It was a little after noon. Buck, probably, would be beautifully tight by now, but Red was too excited to wait. He rushed off in search of his partner.

He found Buck in the café from which they had started, Buck, having visited many cafés, and, like a man in the wilderness—after several drinks—described a circle. Buck, likewise, was beautifully tight, and engaged in a brawl with three sailors off a Portuguese freighter.

Red watched idly, for a while, as Buck battered the three about and the other occupants and barkeep cowered. The going was not particularly rough, and Buck was having a good time. Suddenly he knocked one of the seamen over a chair and to the floor. The man lay still, and Buck turned to the other two. But the man was not knocked out. He rose, craftily, when Buck's back was turned, and drew a knife. He started to spring, but was wrenched back when a huge hand lay hold of his belt. Another huge hand caught his knife wrist, and the weapon clattered to the floor. Then he was lifted bodily and thrown out of the saloon into the street. Red repeated the performance with the other two. Buck turned and glared.

"What the hell!" said Buck.

"Have a drink, Buck?"

"Well— Yeah."

They drank.

"Buck, I got news. Ya sober enough?"

Buck might not have been, but he soon became so. Red told what he had heard in the cathedral. They had another drink. and left.

". . . And when we're about two days at sea," concluded Red, as they neared the *Emerald*, "tell Wicks to spread it with the crew. An' we'll do some spreadin' ourselves."

TEN days later, the *Emerald*, full of liquor, staggered from the Straits of Florida in a choppy sea. It was squally and chilly. Storms from the Grand Banks had descended the ocean lanes and were sweeping south on the Atlantic to lose themselves in the middle latitudes.

Close behind the *Emerald,* though having a little rougher time because she was empty, came the *Principe.*

The crew of the *Emerald,* however, had been apprised of her presence. At least, all the ones that were to be trusted by Wicks, and by Red and Buck, had been informed. So with the black gang.

Off Miami the two ships ran out of rough weather, and bettered their speed. That was in the morning. That afternoon, the *Emerald* was off Jupiter, and Wall cut down the speed. By night the *Principe* was visible on the southern horizon, just before darkness fell. It was a dark night, overcast and gloomy.

At ten-thirty Wall went to the chartroom, and the radio operator to his shack. The operator signaled the *Principe* and then sat down to read a magazine and wait. He had not been reading long, when somebody came to the door. He looked up. It was Buck.

"Hello," said Buck.

"Hello," said the operator. "Want anything?"

"Yeah," said Buck, and sprang at the man.

The operator started to yell, but the yell and a few teeth were rammed down his throat. After that he struggled feebly and vainly until Buck hit him again in the jaw. Buck tied him, gagged him, and put out the light in the shack. Then he carried the man outside, stuck him in a lifeboat, and pulled the canvas covering over him. After that Buck went to the main deck and vanished in a companionway.

All was silent save for the drone of the engine and the whispering of the Atlantic. A light drizzle fell softly out of the vast blackness, and the *Emerald* seemed like a faint mote in an infinity of nothingness. No one stirred on her decks, but in the darkness of companionways and strangely gloomy cabins lurked forty men, waiting, and anxious. No light betrayed the position of the *Principe.*

Above, the wheelsman watched his lighted compass and steered the course. In the chartroom Captain Stony Wall, smoking a cigaret, waited. Outside, behind the flag box, First Officer Murdock crouched and waited. Neither he nor the helmsman seemed to notice when a dark shape stole out of the shadows to the south and crept astarboard the *Emerald.* Neither seemed to notice when it swerved close. As it came closer, Captain Wall rose and stretched. He stepped out of the chartroom into the wheelhouse. Casting a quick glance at the wheelsman, he looked through the door.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "What's that?"

"What?" said the wheelsman.

"That— Hell, it's a ship. Good God, the Coast Guard!" he added as an electric light signaled from the bridge of the dark vessel. "Don't alarm the crew. I don't want no trouble. Steer in close. We're caught."

He signaled back with a flashlight, and the wheelsman steered closer. Wall was intent on the nearing ship. Closer it came and closer, until he saw lines snake out. There were hooks on the ends of the lines. They caught on the rail. He saw a man scramble up one of the ropes, bearing a hawser. The man reached the deck of the *Emerald.* Another man climbed up another rope, also bearing a hawser. Both hawsers were dropped over bitts on the deck of the *Emerald.* The two ships were fast! Wall gripped the door jamb.

"Excited, skipper?"

Wall whirled. Before him, in the dim glow of the compass light, stood First Officer Murdock. Wall glared. Then he stepped close and laid a hand on Red's shoulder.

"Yes," he said. "It's the Coast Guard. They're boardin' us."

"Yeah?"

Wall turned again to look at the *Principe.*

"Wall," said Red, "when I'm cruisin' I *always* go to church."

The captain started violently, and stood, rooted. Then he reached for his hip and a revolver, as he wheeled on Red. But Red was on him.

WALL tore the revolver loose from his pocket and tried to bring it up, but Red grabbed his arm, and lunged as he did so. Also, he twisted the captain's wrist as he lunged forward. Off his balance, Wall fell backward and the revolver was twisted from his grasp. Red kicked it outside into the darkness of the flying bridge. Then they straightened to battle with fists.

Wall rushed. Red waited and caught the captain in the face. Wall staggered back, and Red followed. The captain was big, but never had he felt such blows. They smashed him against the bulkhead and caught him as he recoiled. He backed out the door and tried to get away, but those fists relaxed and huge hands caught him as he started down the ladder. He turned and they fell to the deck, struggling, just as bedlam broke loose below.

They wallowed on the bridge as shots and the clang of machetes against crowbars and hammers sounded on the main deck, in the wells, and on the poop and forecastle. Then they broke and rose.

Red rushed, when they were on their feet, and knocked Wall into the little shelter at the end of the bridge. He followed, and was upon the captain as Wall started to lunge back. He rammed the man's head back with a fearful right and held it over the rail with his left, while he flailed again and again with his right. Wall's green eyes were closed. Blood streamed into them from torn brows. His hooked nose was mashed into his cold face, and his thin mouth had ceased to exist. Finally, he went limp, and, Red releasing him, slid to the deck. Red dragged him back to the wheelhouse. Then he plunged downstairs.

The fight was in full swing all over the ship. He saw Buck in the thick on the main deck. Wicks was forward and the chief engineer aft. Every man of the *Principe's* black crew, and Sims and the officers, had boarded the *Emerald*. Red looked for Sims.

He dodged a machete and rushed the negro that wielded it as the blow fell. He twisted the great knife loose. Then, lifting the black, he slammed him to the deck. The man lay, a broken heap. Machete in hand, Red plunged on. The fight had resolved itself, after the first mêlée, into a series of hand-to-hand battles. Men lay stretched on the deck, here and there, but Red noted, with satisfaction, that, by far, most of them were black.

Red went aft. He had failed to find Sims forward or on the main deck. But, as he leaped down the ladder to the after well deck, he saw a figure crawl out on one of the hawsers connecting the ships. It was Sims. Red turned and hurried back to the main deck. Then he swung out on a hawser himself. He reached the *Principe* and climbed aboard. The man on the other hawser also had reached the *Principe.*

Sims crept along the side of the ship. He dodged into a companionway. Red followed him. Sims came out on the starboard side of the *Principe.* He ran up to the boatdeck. He began working frantically to lower a lifeboat. But Red was on him.

Sims struggled with his long arms and drew a revolver. But Red slapped it from his hands. Sims fought with the desperation of despair, but the fight did not last long. Weakened from the struggle on the *Emerald,* he laid himself open and Red shot a fist to his temple. Sims fell, unconscious.

Neither did the fight on the *Emerald* last much longer. The blacks, bewildered, gave up. Red, carrying Sims, walked across a gangway that had been thrown between the two ships, to the *Emerald.*

TWO months later, the *S. S. Emerald,* mastered by Red Murdock, and the *S. S. Principe,* mastered by Buck Knight, rode at anchor at Colon. The crew of the *Emerald* had been divided, and to them Red and Buck had added others until both had full complements of men. The black crew of the *Principe,* together with Wall and his radio operator, and Sims and his officers, had been dumped on a lonely island off the Carolina coast. Red and Buck had discharged the cargo of the *Emerald* off Jersey and now were back in the tropics with ships of their own.

They were in the Metropole, on Bolívar Street.

"Yeah," said Red after another drink. "Seems like old times."

"Yeah," said Buck.

"Partners, we are. Sure funny."

"Ain't it?"

"Yeah."

"Have a drink on me, an' we'll drink to this partnership."

"Naw, you have one on me."

"I said, have a drink on *me!*"

"An' I said, have one on me!"

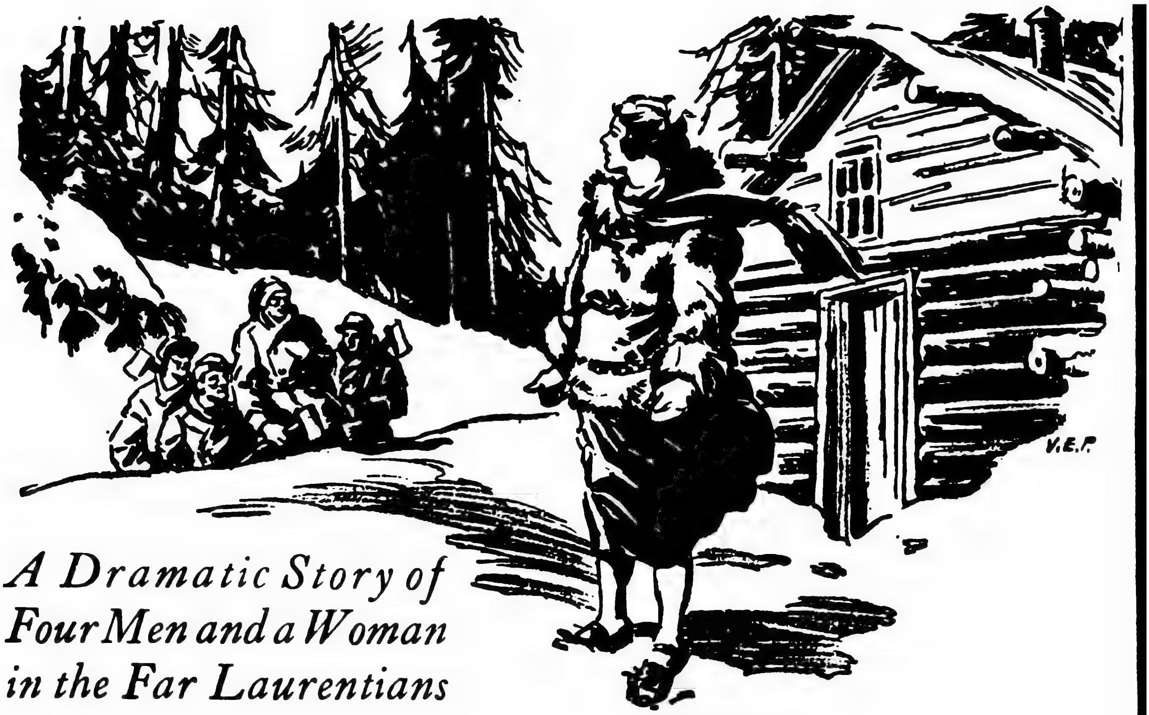
"You refusin' my offer of a drink?"

"You refusin' mine?"

"Yeah. Whadda ya gonna do about it?"

"Jus' that!"

And Red swung lustily at Buck. The fight was on.



A Dramatic Story of Four Men and a Woman in the Far Laurentians

The BLOCKADE

By WILLIAM MERRIAM ROUSE

IT SOON became apparent that there was going to be trouble in the cabin. Jean Fortier, for his part, would have been willing to give up the winter's chopping and go out of the bush rather than stay there. He was able to fight, and at times eager, but he had no heart to look upon treachery that might end in murder. Already it was clear that the giant, Toby Giroux, had set out to ruin Remi Joncas at cards and then take his wife away from him. The fourth man, old Omer Bolduc, was a riddle who was not to be counted on for anything, either good or bad. Jean stood alone with himself. Moreover, he was beginning to believe that the dark loveliness of Adèle Joncas might prove too much for him. It promised to be a very bad affair.

They had come far into the Laurentians, three days' march from the nearest village, and had taken a chopping concession big enough to keep the four men busy until the last of the snows. But for the woman, and her music, the men might have got on together with no more than a fight now and then, such as choppers will have when they are in the bush for six months at a time. Even Toby, who was as surly as he was big, could have endured it for the sake of the money; but not after he had looked twice at Adèle. Not after greed had taken hold of him; not since his peculiar hatred of music had been lashed out of the depths within him by the little phonograph that Madame Joncas had brought up from the old parishes.

By day, things were well enough. The four axes rang in unison; for old Bolduc could keep up his end in chopping with the best of them. And when they made a fire at noon and ate their pork and bread, each man was too concerned with hunger to give much thought to the little building of unhewn logs where a truly beautiful woman went singing about her work, lifting her voice in the *chansons* of Canada which all of them but Giroux had loved since they had been old enough to listen.

The axes sang with the clear tone of good steel, the trees fell in a cloud of fine snow to their own dull thunder, and the ranks of wood to be drawn out at the end of winter began to grow long. For the most part the men worked in silence: Bolduc with a stony face, saving his failing strength as long as he could, Remi Joncas feverishly, and Fortier with the joy of a man who finds life good. Only the enormous Toby brought his ax down with a vicious grunt, using twice the force necessary, as though he had a grudge against each tree. From his talk it was clear that he hungered for much of everything. This broad faced, thick limbed *bucheron* craved much food, tobacco, whisky, money, and many women. And he hated music.

Before the end of the first week the evenings in the cabin had grown painful to Jean Fortier; and he knew that they should have been pleasant to each of the five who had placed themselves there for the dark months of a northern winter. It was a sound cabin—better than the average as it had to be for a woman; and because of her presence it was clean. At one end the bunks were curtained off for Joncas and his wife. The others slept at the opposite end. A big box stove faced the door, with the gun rack on one side of the stove and a table hinged to the wall on the other. There was good food, a hot fire, a tight roof, on account of the woman—and trouble.

For the first two or three evenings Giroux sat heavily upon a wooden bench and smoked, with his brooding eyes following every movement of Adèle as she washed dishes or sewed by the light of a couple of candles. Joncas, tall and loose limbed, paced the floor, wriggled his shoulders, went out into the cracking cold and came in again. But when Adèle took down the battered little phonograph from the beam where she kept it, these two men changed with the first strains of music.

Joncas relaxed with a sigh, flung himself onto his bunk and lay there with an arm across his eyes until the music had finished. Upon Toby Giroux the effect was exactly the opposite. His mighty hands knotted; his forehead wrinkled to an ugly scowl. To Adèle he said nothing. He watched her, glued his gaze to her bright, parted lips, followed her hand as she pushed black hair away from a clear white brow. He drank the smile in her eyes, the long curves of her body. Before that week had passed he was drunk, and he had begun his effort to destroy Remi Joncas.

IT WAS the fourth evening that Toby took a soiled deck of cards from his pack and began indifferently to shuffle them. Fortier saw him glance up, under thick brows, in the direction of Joncas; and Remi Joncas stopped his pacing from end to end of the room. His eyes became very bright and he took an involuntary step toward Giroux; then he stopped and flung a quick glance at his wife. She was looking at him, with the color gone from her cheeks. It seemed that her eyes had suddenly become set in hollows. She began to put her sewing away.

"Who wants to play?" asked Toby, glancing around the room. "Poker? Bezique?"

Omer Bolduc shook his head without removing the pipe that was forever between his remaining teeth. He was without interest, apparently, in anything but his pipe and the number of cords of wood he had cut.

"Fortier?" asked Giroux.

Now, when the cards first appeared Jean had been pleased, thinking of them as something to occupy the minds of at least two of that badly assorted group. But the look that had passed between Joncas and his wife changed this feeling.

"No, thanks," said Jean. "I hope madame is going to make music, and I can't listen so well with a hand of cards to watch."

"Music!" snorted Giroux. He shrugged. "*Eh, bien*, Joncas. You and I are the only ones."

"Never mind." Already Remi Joncas had found a piece of board to put across their knees. He avoided looking at his wife as he drew up a bench. "A game is a game!"

With slow movements Adèle Joncas took down the phonograph and set it on the table. She wound it up and chose a record from her pathetically small store. It ran through the mind of Jean Fortier that if he had a wife like her he would contrive to buy her more than half a dozen pieces of music. A song drifted through the room.

"A la claire fontaine
M'en allant promener. . . ."

She had chosen the favorite *chanson* of her people; and when it was finished she began to wind the machine to play it again. Giroux, dealing, muttered in a low tone and Joncas turned to his wife. Now he was like a man who has just taken a stiff drink, braced, self-confident, all his unhappy restlessness gone for the time.

"We can't play so well when the machine's going," he said. "It bothers Toby."

"Ah, well!" exclaimed Madame Joncas, softly. "I can wait."

She put the phonograph away and sat down, leaning back against the rough bark of the log wall with her hands clasped behind her head. Her gaze was fixed upon spaces beyond the cabin as she repeated, in a very low voice, the words of the song:

"To the clear fountain
I am going to travel.
I have found waters so fair
That I am going to bathe in them.
Oh, it's a long time that I
have loved thee!
Never will I forget thee!"

"It makes me sick, that song," said Toby, picking up his cards. "A mess of nonsense that means nothing."

"Your play," exclaimed Joncas. "Never mind her. She's always singing."

For a moment Jean Fortier was of a mind to go and start the phonograph himself; then he cooled. What folly to have trouble now, with the work well started. That surly bull of a Giroux could be ignored. Fortier got up and walked carelessly to the phonograph, pretending to examine it as he tried to think of something to say to comfort Adèle Joncas.

"I like your music, madame! I thought of buying one of these machines when I was in Quebec last summer, but a man like me cannot carry much more than a rifle and his pack."

She smiled up at him and brought her thoughts back from the far spaces. He saw that her eyes were brown, clear and deep, and capable of many changes.

"I know you like music," she said. "It is written in your face."

"It makes me happy, madame."

"Is there such a thing as happiness?" Her eyes clouded suddenly.

"You are not happy?"

She made a gesture toward the card players; her mouth quivered.

"My husband likes music—when he can forget the cards. I hoped there would be no one here to play with him."

She had dropped her voice so low that the others could not hear, but Fortier saw that Toby was staring at him. Into his mind came a thought, vague but discomforting, that Giroux might have an object beyond the winning of the money of Joncas.

"Your husband, does he love cards so well?"

"Ah, too well!" She hesitated. "That—that has been a great sadness, monsieur."

The heart of Jean Fortier, at no time very hard, became wax. He must be as much of a friend to this woman as she and circumstances would permit.

"You call me 'monsieur'. We are in the bush—choppers. Not people of the villages, where they say 'monsieur' and 'madame' with every few words."

"Well, then—Jean!" She smiled at him frankly.

A curse and a chuckle from the card players turned their heads. Joncas got up quickly and came over to them. The hand that he held out trembled.

"Some money, Adèle!"

"You—" She swallowed, controlled her voice. "You have lost what you had?"

"Certainly, or I wouldn't ask for more! Give me five dollars."

Slowly the hand of Adèle Joncas went to her bosom, drew forth a pocketbook, worn brown at the corners. Jean gave his attention to the phonograph as she opened it, but he could not help hearing what was said.

"This is all we have until spring, Remi. Be careful! Please. Remember the house in Rivière du Loup that was lost. The farm at Lac St. Jean."

"Be quiet!" exclaimed Joncas, in a fierce undertone. "That fellow's got money. He may not play with me if you begin your whining."

"*Dieu!*" breathed Adèle.

Jean heard the crackle of paper. He turned away from the machine as Joncas went back to his game. The eyes of Adèle Joncas were brimming, but she smiled.

"There is always someone who will play with him."

Fortier wondered just how clearly he

instinct had warned her against Giroux.

"I will do what I can for you," he told her, thoughtfully.

"You will?" she exclaimed. "I know men do not like to interfere. I am grateful, Jean Fortier."

"Me, I am grateful for the chance to do something for you," said Jean. Then, abruptly, he went out of the cabin into the night.

FORTIER stood under the stars with his feet braced in the snow, head flung back, indifferent to that cold which was like the grip of a giant hand. A wind was sweeping his soul along, fanning a glow that threatened to burst into a great flame. Jean Fortier, who had been afraid neither of wilderness nor of wild beast nor of the worst of his own kind, was afraid now—of himself.

A frost riven branch cracked with a sound like a rifle shot. Jean shuddered and went back into the cabin. There the game was still going on. Fortier filled the stove with wood. Again Joncas went to his wife for money, and this time she gave it to him without protest. The grin on the face of Toby Giroux grew broader.

The kindly blue eyes of Fortier dimmed with pain as he watched Adèle Joncas, sewing with fingers forced to their task. His slender but well knit length slumped upon the bench where he sat. Very well he knew how little he could do to help her. At last she put her work away, replaced the phonograph tenderly on its beam and retired behind the curtains.

Omer Bolduc knocked out his pipe and turned in without a word to anyone. Jean barred the door and went to his bunk. The last thing he remembered that night was the slap and shuffle of cards and the low occasional words of Joncas and Toby.

The next day Fortier tried to get an opportunity to be alone with Toby but it seemed that the big fellow avoided him. That night there was another session with the cards; and another visit to the pocketbook of the Joncas family. Adèle did not attempt to play the phonograph; nor did she sing while the card game was going on.

It was three days before Fortier had a chance to speak to Giroux. He came into the cabin, after the day's work, with a pail of fresh water. There was no one but Toby in sight and Jean wasted no time.

"Giroux," he said, "I want to talk to you about Joncas."

"Then don't talk!" Toby Giroux looked at him, with the willingness to murder written between low growing hair and jutting chin. But Fortier, who had spent most of his life in the *chantiers* of the North, was not to be silenced by a stare. He cared not at all that Giroux outweighed him twenty or thirty pounds, that the big man's shoulder muscles bulged until his sleeve could hardly contain the arm that was moving toward his knife.

"Stop me if you can!" barked Fortier. "Do you see that Joncas' wife grows thin day by day, when we have good food? She cries by night. This is not my business. I know it. But in the games where I have played, it was not good to strip a man of all he had!"

"You mean that I cheat?" The hand of Giroux settled upon the hilt of his knife. Jean's fingers found his own weapon. They looked at each other. But to Fortier it seemed that an inward voice was whispering to him that he could best serve the cause of Adèle Joncas by waiting.

"That I don't know," he said to Toby, truthfully.

"I *shall* play with Joncas!" Giroux said firmly, then shrugged and sneered. He relaxed. "Who is there here to take from me what I win?"

"Keep his money, then!" exclaimed Jean. "I have said what I have to say."

He had turned to go out of doors again when he saw a pair of legs appear from the bunk of Omer Bolduc. The old man groaned as he let himself down to the floor, stiff with age and rheumatism.

"Never again will I go to a *chantier* where there is a woman," he grunted. "I hope one of you kills the other very soon. Then there will be peace."

He sat down and began to fill his pipe, paying no further attention to the others. Jean Fortier went out into the gathering darkness. He saw Adèle and Remi standing at a corner of the cabin. The low sound of her sobs came to him, overridden by the angry voice of her husband. Jean strode down the trampled path toward the place where they chopped. Supperless, he walked that path until the full glory of the stars had come out above him.

From that night on, time drifted in a

monotony of suffering. For the most part there was silence among those in the cabin —except between Toby Giroux and Joncas. These two played cards every evening. The phonograph remained on the beam and the voice of Adèle was stilled from supper until morning came again.

But during the long days, she played and sang to herself. Jean, coming back to the cabin occasionally for matches or tobacco, would be met by *"A la Claire Fontaine"* or *"En Roulant Ma Boule"* as he opened the door. He would smile at Adèle and she would give him a glimpse of that brightness which made all his world different. Then he would go out, perhaps without having spoken to her.

There could be no doubt that Toby was winning a great deal from Joncas. Once in a while Remi would flush with something akin to joy, rub his hands when the evening session was finished, and smile. But for one of these evenings there was a dozen when he pushed back from the game with drooping shoulders and eyes staring at the floor. Day by day Adèle grew more pale, thinner. Day by day Jean ached with a pain of increasing bitterness.

At last there came a night when Joncas and Toby played far later than they ever had before. Fortier awakened toward daylight and saw them still bending over the board that lay across their knees. He went back to sleep. And when the dawn came and they had started work, he saw that Remi Joncas was pasty of color and very deep in thought. His ax rose and fell as usual and he went through the motions of living like the rest of them, but it was clear to see that his mind was buried in some place of torment.

THAT evening Remi Joncas paced the floor as he had through the first few evenings in camp; a man driven by some desire from which he could not flee no matter how many miles he covered. He glanced at Adèle now and then, and away again. He did not meet the clear eyes that followed him but he looked at her. His hands were locked behind his back and the fingers laced in and out in tune to his uneasy thoughts. At last he stopped in front of Toby Giroux, who had spent the past hour ruffling his cards, and made a gesture. That gesture swept away barriers. It was a decision.

"We'll play," said Joncas, in a low tone. "It goes as you said."

"Bon!"

Giroux straightened up so quickly that even old Omer allowed his eyes to flicker in surprise. His big hands were eager as he shuffled the cards, his face alight with an unholy glow.

The game began. Fortier, looking at Adèle, saw her eyes fill as she stared across the room at the barren wall, saw two drops gather and tremble and find their way down the hollows of her cheeks. It was more than he could stand. He sprang up, and as he caught her glance he made a slight movement of his head toward the door. Jean went out, and as he went he noted that Toby was looking darkly up at him under those brows which were like brush heaps. He had seen that signal, without doubt.

Fortier stood on the hard packed snow before the cabin, with drifts shoulder high on each side, and waited for the light step of Adèle. He heard the door close. She came, and he thrilled to the swift, crisp sound of her feet. He set his teeth against the joy that it was to be waiting for her, to have her come to him. Jean Fortier was there to help her—and that was all.

"I understood," she murmured, as she came up beside him. "You want to do something for me. But it is too late, my friend."

"Too late?" he repeated.

"He has lost everything! All that we had saved and all he will get from the work of this winter. What he plays with tonight I don't know. It must be that he is getting a debt for us."

"There should be no law against shooting the breed of Toby Giroux!"

"I am afraid of him!" she exclaimed. "I admit it now. And he has almost finished Remi."

"Almost!" echoed Fortier, bitterly. "Is he not completely finished?"

"Bon Dieu! Am I the only one who has faith that he can be saved? I am alone!"

Jean Fortier was shaken, his face twisted in the merciful dimness of the starlight. He turned and took her by the shoulders.

"Adèle! You know—you must know—I would give my life for you!"

"Don't, Jean!" Her cry cut that frozen stillness like a swift thrust of pain. "I cannot bear this much more."

"I suffer so, Adèle. I suffer——"

"Oh, dear fool!" The fingers of Adèle clutched the thick sleeves of his capote. "Jean! Jean! It is not you more than Adèle, who suffers. But for you there is the future. Other women——"

"*Dieu Seigneur!* You know you have lied, my little one. There is no other like you! And you and I must live in hell because of that man inside there who cares nothing for you. Who——"

"Jean!" Her chilled hand clamped upon his mouth. "What do you do in the bush when the wolves come, three together, two for the feint and one for the attack in the rear? Tell me, Jean Fortier, what do you do?"

"I stand and fight!" he cried, so that his voice rang and echoed from the dark wall of the forest.

"Ah!" She drew a great breath. "And what do you do when you are back to the wall with a knife in front of you?"

"I give my soul to *le bon Dieu,* and fight!"

"Good! And me, I fight. Will you stand and fight, or will you be one of the wolves that come at me to pull me down? Answer, Jean Fortier."

"You fight for him?"

"For him and for myself. Have you never seen a man down, and in need of a friend? Have you never stood in front of a friend? Shame, then! I know you have or you would not be—my Jean!"

Slowly Jean Fortier lifted her hand and laid it against his cheek, and pressed it there as though he would stamp his spirit with the imprint of her high courage.

"I understand, Adèle."

"We fight! And each alone! The rest, my Jean, is with *le bon Dieu.*"

"Yes," he said. "It is the truth that I could not steal from Remi Joncas, nor from any other man. Always I have been *bon camarade,* Adèle!"

"I have not known you, but I know that." She tried to laugh gayly, and wrenched the heart of Fortier with the sound. "If it were not true I could not call you 'my Jean.' And I cannot leave Remi because I, also, am a good *camarade.*"

"I cannot leave you—nor him, now," said Fortier, slowly. "Giroux will keep him . . . Joncas will not go. It is a blockade."

"It will break, Jean, if we stand."

"If it does not break us."

"Have faith!"

"I shall fight, faith or no faith."

"Me, I must have faith, my Jean, for I am afraid. I must find—the clear fountain. You understand, Jean?"

"Adèle! Ah, Adèle!"

"Come!" she cried, turning toward the cabin with her face lifted to the stars. "It is for us to keep the wolves from Remi. But—never will I forget thee!"

Jean Fortier followed her, closed the door behind them, and stood blinking in the candlelight. The game had stopped, but this time the cards lay scattered on board and bench and floor. Giroux sat in his place, with a glitter in the eyes which met Jean and Adèle, and a curl of triumph lifting his thick lip. He did not speak as they came in, but not for an instant did his gaze leave the woman.

ADÈLE wanted music. She had need of it. Fortier saw her glance turn to the phonograph, and he understood. Moreover, he knew she wanted to help the silent figure that was Remi Joncas. That he had lost was certain. He lay stretched on his bunk with both arms over his face. But Jean noticed that he was peering at them. Only Omer Bolduc remained unaffected by the tension of that atmosphere. His hand was steady as a rock when he held a match above the bowl of his pipe.

There was an unknown danger in the air. If Adèle got courage to play she would bring upon them the storm that was hovering. And she was gathering courage. She went chalk white as her gaze traveled from the phonograph to the face of Toby, then back to the battered machine. Fortier regretted that she had to play. It was a time for courage but not for recklessness. Yet he understood that the music was a symbol of her faith in herself; a stand against Giroux; a test because her husband needed it.

Jean could see her gathering strength. He drew a breath of resignation. All he could do now was to hope that Toby was not ready for an open clash; that he had more to win from Joncas. But hope faded. The emotion of Toby Giroux filled the room like a fog. The veins in his bull neck stood out and made little ridges in the candlelight. His heavy face had become dark with blood.

Suddenly Adèle flung back her head. It was a gesture of triumph and of despair. It was as though she had placed a little moccasined foot on the neck of Fear, although she knew what price might be paid there for her courage to defy Giroux. To Fortier she had never seemed so beautiful as in that moment when light from one of the bracketed candles fell softly upon her hollowed cheeks. It revealed the curve of her chin and the beautiful line from ear to shoulder. Her gaze turned to Jean for an instant, and it seemed to him that he looked through a long perspective into a kingdom of eternal peace.

Adèle crossed the room with deliberate steps and took down the phonograph. She set it on the table and wound it. Jean watched her hands; long and slender, delicate, and yet strong with the strength of hands that are used to some purpose. Like butterflies, they hovered over the records tenderly before she chose one. She released the spring and music drifted through the cabin, taking possession of it.

"A la claire fontaine. . . ."

With the first words of the song the great muscles of Toby Giroux became tense. He was a wild beast ready to spring. Adèle did not look at him; she stood with her head slightly to one side, staring at the floor, as though she heard something which the others did not.

"M'en allant promener. . . ."

"Stop that thing!" bellowed Giroux.

The noise of his command smothered the music for an instant, and was lost. The song went on.

"J'ci trouvé l'eau si belle. . . ."

Toby got up, lifted by the tornado of his own wrath. Adèle looked down upon him from immeasurable heights, and smiled defiance.

"Que je m'y suis baigné. . . ."

Giroux broke through whatever had held him. He advanced upon Adèle. Jean, waiting all this time, leaped forward.

"Don't touch her!" he thundered.

Giroux turned. They faced each other, Toby with his knife balanced on the palm of his hand.

"Do you want it?" he snarled. "Or will you mind your own business? She belongs to *me* now!"

"What?" cried Fortier, dazed. "What's that?"

"I won her from Joncas tonight. I'm going to have her."

Adèle reeled against the wall. Dark terror was in her eyes but her chin was high and her courage undimmed. Joncas sat up. His teeth chattered.

"Is that true, Joncas?" demanded Jean.

"Y-yes!" he stuttered, in a thin, high voice. "Oh Adèle! Adèle!"

Through a moment of deep quiet came the refrain of the song.

"Lui ya longtemps que je t'aime,
Jamais je ne t'oublierai!"

In the eyes of Adèle, Jean saw more bitterness than he had believed human eyes could hold. And then again faith came shining through, as from a sepulcher of dead hopes.

Toby laughed. Then Fortier knew that the time had come. He went forward warily, lightly, knife in hand. The picture of Joncas sitting on the bunk, face buried in his hands, remained with Jean; Bolduc on his bench, smoking; and Adèle leaning against the wall. Not one of them moved. Fortier knew that he was alone in this battle.

It was the advance of a terrier upon a bull. Jean had made up his mind to die for the woman he loved, and it gave him a curious lightness of heart, something akin to joy. A rush, a cry from Adèle, a lightning play of steel. Fortier had gone in and out again, slashing. He had cut Toby's sleeve from wrist to elbow and left a long red line upon the thick forearm.

The smart of that wound added, if possible, to the fury of Toby Giroux. A smaller man had attacked him and got away in safety. He lowered his head and turned slowly as Jean moved in front of him. The phonograph ran down with a hoarse scratching. The *pad-pad* of moccasins and quick breathing were the only sounds in the cabin.

Jean found time to glance at Adèle. If he had risked his life he would have done it. She was no longer a saint. She had become a woman again and a man was fighting for her. Shining eyes and parted lips . . . She lifted his soul. He rushed a second time and scored. A long lunge touched Giroux, pricked him in the ribs and for an instant drove the blood from his dark face.

Then Fortier grew too eager. He pretended to attack, retreated to draw Toby after him and failed to take proper account of the ground behind. He found himself falling and realized that he had tripped over the feet of Omer Bolduc, that silent and apparently indifferent witness. Jean sprawled flat. An instant he lay with outflung arms, and Toby Giroux took full advantage of that instant. His arm drew back, poised his knife, and threw it.

Jean, staring up past the immobile face of Bolduc, saw the flash of steel, felt the parting of flesh as that blade drove through the collar of his shirt and pinned him to the floor. Giroux came, gloating. He leaned down and took the knife that had fallen from the hand of Fortier.

"You'll stay there," he growled, "until I get ready to bury you!"

JEAN had been held motionless and stunned as much by shock as by the knife. He knew now that it had missed the great vein and that only a strip of muscle at the base of his neck was pierced. He must get up! Toby had turned away from him, satisfied, and was swaggering toward Adèle.

Fortier set his teeth together and, panting with the effort, flung up an arm and pulled the knife clear of shirt and flesh. He had to get up! Toby was reaching for Adèle. She shrank against the table. Jean rolled over and got his feet under him, dizzily.

Suddenly a great cry filled the room; the cry of a soul hurled over the brink of despair. Fortier, upright at last, saw Remi Joncas leap across the room and throw himself headlong upon Giroux.

It was finished before Jean could do more than take a firm grip upon his knife. There was a moment's struggle; then Joncas sank down slowly. He went to his knees, and tumbled over to one side. Toby drew away, teeth bared, the knife still in his hand. He stared stupidly at what he had done; stared until he realized that Fortier was at him, raging with a fury which transcended superior strength and weight.

Jean drove Giroux in a long arc until they had gone around to the side of the stove where Bolduc sat and where the racked guns hung against the wall. Jean beat down his guard, caught the blade with a twist, and sent it ringing across the cabin.

Toby jumped backward and reached for a rifle. His hand had laid hold upon one of them when Omer Bolduc made his first movement since the beginning of the fight. He rose as though he were on springs and swept a gun from the rack before Toby could bring his into action. Old Omer brought the stock down upon the head towering above him. Giroux fell as a tree falls, mightily, shaking that solid building. He lay at full length, quiet.

"Me, I like music," said Bolduc. He put the gun back and sat down, reaching for his pipe.

Jean was already on his way to Adèle. She knelt beside her husband and took his head upon her lap. The eyes of Remi Joncas opened and cleared as they looked up into the faces bending over him. A faint smile touched his pale lips.

"I was—good to you—at last!" he whispered, to his wife. Her fingers smoothed his hair. She shut her teeth down upon a little whimper of pain.

"Yes, Remi."

"Jean plays—with a straight deck. I lose—Adèle!"

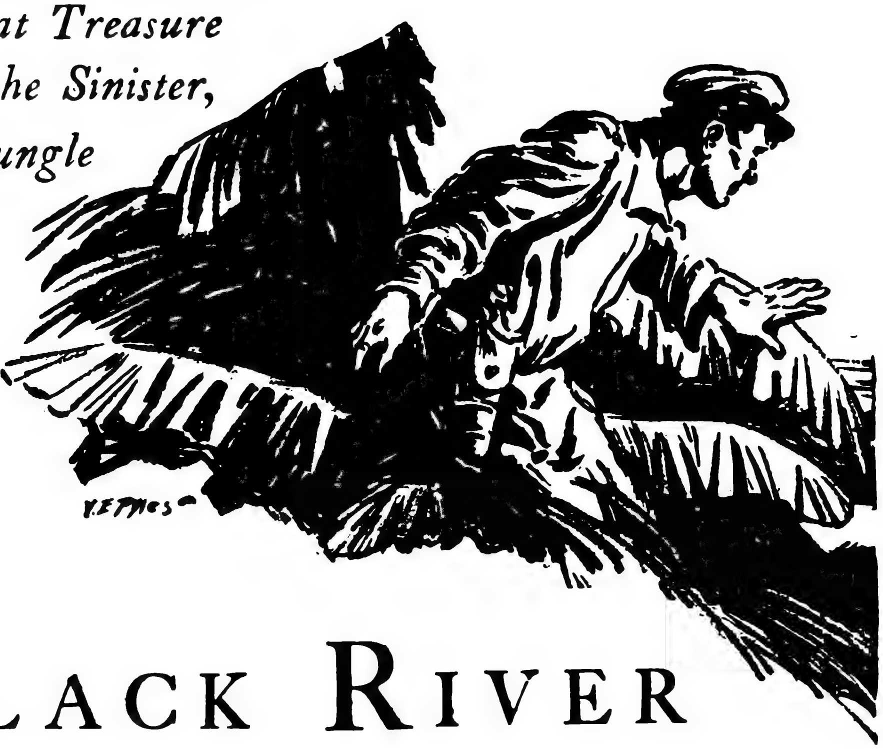
He sighed like a very sleepy child, and was gone. Adèle looked up to Jean; her eyes begged for comfort. Bewildered, pleading, they found him and rested. He raised her to her feet, unbarred the door and led her out into the star jeweled night. The frozen snow crunched with a clean, fresh sound as they walked a few steps from the cabin. The great drifts gleamed like frosted silver.

"The blockade is broken," said Jean, in a low voice. "Giroux will go out of the bush at the end of a rifle tomorrow."

She lifted her arms to the beautiful world of dark forest set in a silver white frame, to the stars above them.

"It had to break, my Jean," she whispered, "if we stood fast!"

A Story of Blood Vengeance,
and of a Great Treasure
Guarded by the Sinister,
Silent Jungle



BLACK RIVER

By R. W. ALEXANDER

CHAPTER I

THE *ADVENTURE* IS BUILT

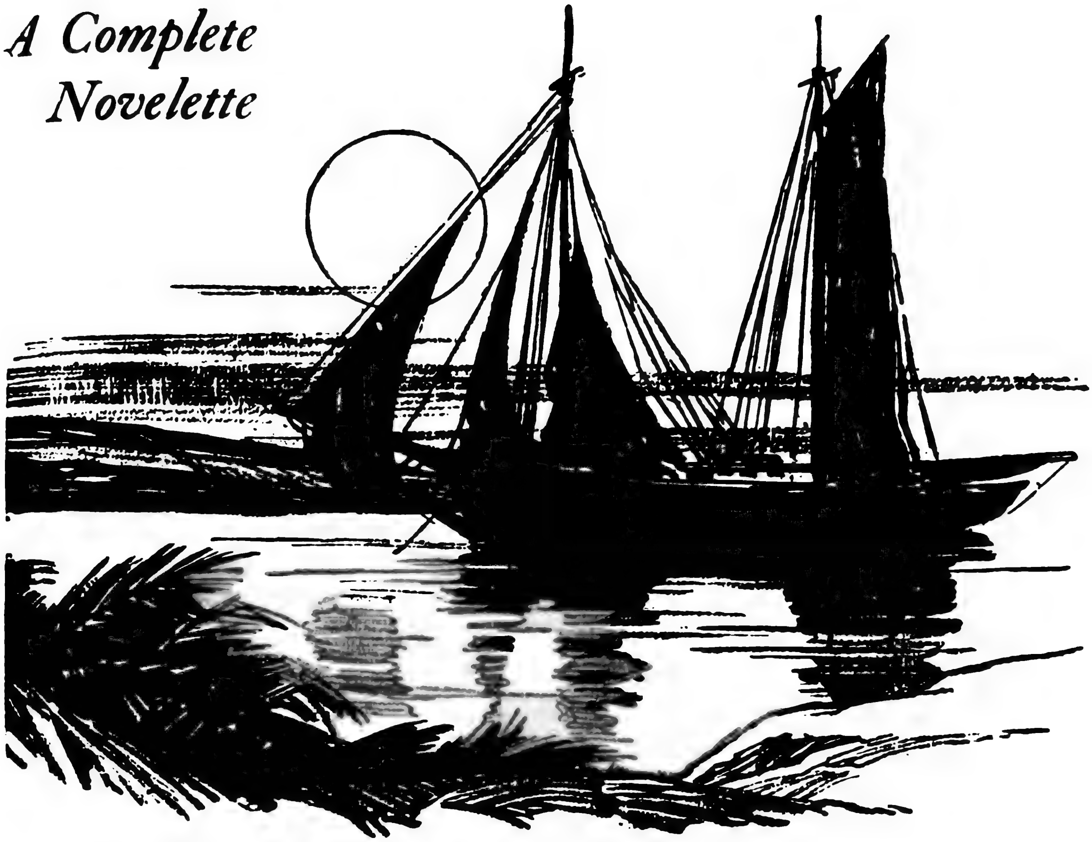
DEXTER the boatbuilder had his yard abutting on Captain's Wharf, alongside a narrow chasm of water between slimed piers. Here he built craft to stand the heavy pounding of the seas, tropic heat and arctic cold, floating them down the narrow chasm to where the harbor gleamed beneath its forest of stirring masts. All San Francisco knew him.

He lived in a spacious room above the yard, eating at the saloon around the corner of the wharf. He lived alone, and worked alone. Not because men disliked him; but because he preferred it so. When he worked, he liked to think of nothing but his work; and when he took his ease, he liked to sit and dream and watch the rolling clouds, or the birds above the harbor, or the seamen strolling by.

He lived in a little backwater of the strident town, seldom disturbed by eddies from the larger stream. A throng as mixed as any passed his door, and he looked down upon it with a strange detachment. These men had seen the world of which he dreamed; their careless swagger proclaimed it, and their sea-gray eyes. They had seen Eastern ports drowsy in the heat, and others white under a six months' mantle of snow, while he had whistled here and built his boats. That was their life. This was his.

He built good boats, light, strong, and wonderfully seaworthy, and was given his own price. He worked slowly, with an infinite carefulness in little things. A Dexter boat was an addition to any ship. He took his own time in the building, and would not hurry.

Dexter was a big man, slow in movement as in speech, fair haired and blue eyed. Most often grave, he had a smile that wrinkled his face in pleasant lines and showed his white teeth. He seemed a little out of place, here in the clean smelling yard; you would have thought of him as more at home on the deck of a pitching schooner, or bringing a whaleboat in across the reef of some green island, muscles bunched and eyes intent, ready to heave



the oar this way or that with all his strength. He might have been thirty, or perhaps a few years younger. The pleasant gravity of his face added to his age.

So he lived and worked, tranquilly, interfering with none, liked and respected by all with whom he came in contact. So, in the same tranquillity, he hoped to live out his days.

In the cool of one evening Dexter saw some boys around a stooped Chinese. The yellow man walked with that quick shuffle of the Orient, gaze on the ground and shoulders bent, ignoring the boys who taunted him. They might have been of another world, so little did he notice them.

Dexter watched with a detached interest, leaning from the wide window of his room. The boys hacked at the Celestial's heels, and laughed when he stumbled. They picked refuse from the gutter and threw it at him. Still he went heedless on his way. Dexter admired him.

A big seaman came swaggering down the street, midway between the houses and the narrow gap where the water gleamed. He swung to one side, full into the yellow man's path. The Chinese stepped aside to pass. Again the big man blocked his way. The boys howled. The seaman threw back his head and laughed. He saw Dexter, watching from the window above, and derisively pointed to the Chinese.

"Yellabelly!" the boys howled. "Ya, ya, yellabelly!"

"Leave him be," said Dexter.

"Eh?" said the big seaman.

"Leave him be," said Dexter again.

The seaman exploded into foul abuse. Dexter listened without a change of expression. These were words, and words mattered nothing. They left him utterly unmoved.

"Leave him be!" the sailor mimicked. "Come down, you, and make me leave him be."

Dexter laughed. He was not afraid—just unmoved. This sailor meant no more to him than the parrot squalling in its cage down the street. He was not real.

"Come on, you windbag!" said the sailor.

He swung one hand, struck the Chinese across the head, sent him sprawling to the ground.

Something primeval flared to life in Dexter. It made things red, as if he saw through a mist of blood. He was aware of a savagery he had never dreamed to lie within him. He swung his legs through the window, dropped into the street.

The sailor made for him, grinning. He was a big man, hard with years of constant toil, muscled like a bear. He struck at Dexter's head, with a quick hiss of expelled breath to tell the force behind the blow.

Dexter slipped the flailing fist, took the seaman by the throat, shook him an instant, flung him down. For the first time he knew and gloried in the strength of his arms, of his deep chest and massive shoulders. His instinct, then, was to kill ruthlessly; but the cold voice of reason bade him hesitate.

The sailor was up, a knife in his hand and murder in his eyes. He came forward in a crouch, empty hand out, right shoulder and arm back for the finishing blow. Dexter trembled—not with fear, but with anticipation. He, too, crouched a little, poised on his toes. Down the street a woman screamed sharply; the other watchers preserved a terrible silence. Dexter, even in that last second, analyzed their emotions, the cold bloodlust that held them back from interference. They were in the grip of an instinct stronger than themselves, older than civilization. And so was he.

The sailor leaped. Dexter caught the upflung arm, twisted it back, encircled the writhing body with an arm like steel. Strength surged within him in a boundless tide. With the greatest of ease he could have broken the sailor's spine. Instead, he lifted him, held him an instant, struggling, then hurled him into the water between the weed-green piers.

He looked about him. The boys were silent, scared, moving off. The men were smiling, the women frankly laughing, though with a touch of wildness in their mirth. The tension so prevalent a moment ago was now completely gone.

Dexter looked at the Chinese, and met the glance of inscrutable dark eyes set in a face marred and puckered by a dozen scars. They held him, fascinated him, until he saw a gleam of laughter in their depths. Then he smiled.

"He scared you, eh, John?"

The shaven head nodded slightly in dissent.

"No."

A yellow hand came briefly from one wide sleeve, holding a murderous curved knife, and vanished again.

"But here a white man cannot be killed without trouble."

The Chinese showed his teeth in a little grin. Except for a certain sibilance, his speech was perfect.

"You live around here?" Dexter said, watching the sailor clamber laboriously from the water on the far side of the chasm.

"Pretty near. You come to see me some day? Chang Lin, scrap merchant. Yes?"

Dexter nodded.

"Maybe so. So long, Chang."

He lounged back into his yard, and to his room.

HE WAS annoyed, and troubled. The outburst of passion that had mastered him was something new in his experience, foreign to his nature. Never before had he allowed things to touch him closely enough to lose control of his temper. This sudden revelation of a primal savagery dormant within him, awakened to violence now for the first time, was alarming. It threatened the tranquillity of his life. And above all other things Dexter valued that tranquillity. He had his work, his boats. He needed nothing more.

Far into that night he smoked thoughtfully, watching the clear faced moon. His father had been a man of violence, a wanderer, hard fisted, intolerant, renowned throughout the Islands and the ports of the Pacific. He had died in his prime, riddled with bullets in a saloon in the Dutch Indies, pulling trigger even while he died. Dexter, smoking there, wondered if his father's turbulent nature had come to him, had lain unsuspected within him all these years.

He faced it frankly. If this were so, what effect would it have upon his life? That was a question he found hard to answer. The longing to travel, to see strange lands, strange faces, he had always carefully repressed. His mother's gentle nature had recurred in him in this desire for tranquillity. She had longed for nothing but unbroken calm, had died longing for it when news of that fracas in the Dutch saloon had filtered back.

Dexter thought that had been responsible for his repression, for his long years' mastery of the spirit of adventure. And, now that the ruder nature had flared forth, he was disturbed, troubled, and, in a way, glad. That moment of cold ferocity when he had held above his head the struggling seaman brought in memory a strange, wild exultation, a savage glorying in the strength that was his.

This exultation was still within him when, a few weeks later, he laid the keel of a sloop that was to be his own. Why he had decided to build her he could not say. The desire to possess a seagoing craft had come to him suddenly, inexplicably; and irresistibly. He made no effort to fight it. Perhaps he would keep her, perhaps he would sell her. But certainly he would build her, and build her with all the art at his command.

She grew steadily. From the first he loved her. He worked at her tirelessly from dawn till dark, careless of the men who came to him for boats. He had money saved; he could afford to let them go. When the sloop was finished, they would return. He knew that. Dexter boats were always in demand. And as he worked alone, the supply could never exceed the demand.

Six months saw her afloat, a beautiful, sleek thing, built for speed, slender and rakish. He fitted her masts and rigging, furnished her cabin, christened her the *Adventure*. And then, content, he rested. If ever he wanted her, she was there. But the spirit of revolt had died within him, and he doubted if she would ever leave the harbor with him at the wheel. Unremitting labor had brought back to him the tranquillity he had thought lost. Once again he was satisfied with life as it came.

He formed, these days, a queer friendship with the Chinese, Chang Lin. To Dexter, Chang Lin was an enigma, an object of perpetual speculation and wonder. He seemed old, yet he had all the agility of youth, and his thin arms hid unguessable strength. He had seen strange places and known strange men—places and men stranger than he was willing to admit, Dexter thought. For the Celestial spoke little, and only a casual reference now and then led Dexter to believe that he had lived his life among spirits wild and uncontrolled, in places where the law of the gun and the knife ruled supreme.

He had known Dexter's father. Dexter discovered that with a shock of incredulity. But Chang Lin left him no room for doubt.

"You are his son," Chang Lin said. "Some day you will go south, and there will be another Dexter in the Islands. Here, you are lost." He smiled, fleetingly. "You are a killer whale among sharks."

"I am content," Dexter said slowly.

"You are not content," said Chang Lin. "You will never be content until you have killed."

Dexter started.

"Killed?"

"It is in your blood," said the Celestial.

"I'll wear it out!" Dexter said impatiently.

Chang Lin smiled.

THE *Adventure* had been built a year when Chang Lin sent an urgent message to Dexter.

Dexter went to the yellow man's house that night and knocked. A long moment elapsed before Chang Lin opened the door. Dexter saw a knife glitter in far flung light.

"Come in quickly!" Chang Lin said.

Dexter went in quickly. Chang Lin closed the door and guided him along the narrow passage until they came to another door that opened on a lighted room.

"Death is abroad tonight," said the Chinese, waving Dexter to a chair. "That is why I sent for you."

Dexter nodded, waiting. There was a queer stirring in his blood, a tenseness of his muscles, such as he had known that night he fought the sailor. His breathing, too, had quickened a little, as if he had run some distance. He was conscious of a strange exultation, a readiness for what he knew was to come.

There were dancing lights in the Celestial's eyes.

"Did you ever hear of Spanish Joe?"

Dexter stiffened and his head came forward.

"Yes! Spanish Joe and his gang killed my father."

"That is so," Chang Lin said. "Your father killed three; but they were nine. They took him unawares, or perhaps he would have killed them all. Then, Maralee was killed in Halmahera. That left five—Spanish Joe, Pedro the Black, Sark, Carrion Crow, and Finn.

"Maralee died a month after your father," Chang Lin continued. He smiled, drawing the curved steel from his sleeve. "This knife ripped his body like a rotten melon. Since then, Spanish Joe and the others have hunted me. And now they have come here."

"Here?" Dexter said.

"Their schooner, the *Southern Witch,* lies in the harbor."

Dexter stood up, paced nervously about the room.

"They must have some other object in following you."

"They have."

From a cabinet at one side of the room Chang Lin took a small iron box.

"Did you ever hear of Black River?"

Dexter shook his head.

"Never."

"It is in Peru, in the dwarf country. Twelve years or more ago, an adventurer named Harker discovered that it held gold. He brought his schooner far inland, up the river, and for almost a year washed out gold, he and his men. With this treasure they sailed downriver.

"The schooner ran on a mud bank, and they were forced to abandon her. They went on in the boats. Because of its great weight the gold was left behind on the schooner, Harker meaning to return later for it. And darkness covered them.

"He never returned. He and his men landed on a barren island far out to sea and there died of thirst. I saw their bones and the boats in which they had come.

"But Harker left this box behind him, and in it a plan of the river, showing the mud bank where the schooner lay aground. This box I found, hunting for guano.

"Harker, before sailing, had spoken of a river bottomed with gold and had aroused much interest in himself. When he disappeared, this tale became a legend, and men spoke in a whisper of the gold Harker had found before he died. So that, when I found the box, I knew I had found something of great value.

"Without sharing the secret with others, I could do nothing then. I waited patiently. But the story of how we had found Harker and his men was spread about, and it was asked had we found nothing more. One of my men must have seen me take and hide the box; because Spanish Joe came to me and offered me much money for it, raising his offer when I denied all knowledge of any box.

"When I still refused, they tried to steal it. That was when Maralee died. I had a junk. They burned it. I fled. They followed. When I came here, I thought they had lost the scent. But they will never read what Harker wrote."

Chang Lin took a paper from the box, held it above the flame of the lamp until it shriveled and burst into flame, held it until it drifted in black ashes to the floor.

"I can remember, and you can remember, and we will go together and get this gold that Harker left on his schooner in Black River. . . ."

A man was singing in the street outside, singing in a clear, gay, lilting voice. Chang Lin crouched, knife out, eyes narrowed to slits.

"The food was bad and the wages low,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her.
But now ashore again we'll go,
And it's time for us to leave her.
The sails are furled and our work is done,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her.
And now ashore we'll have our fun,
For it's time for us to leave her."

"Spanish Joe!" Chang Lin said softly. "Does he know——"

A thundering knock came on the door.

"Chang Lin, Chang Lin!" a great voice bellowed.

"Sark!" Chang Lin hissed. He darted from the room, to return in an instant. "The house is surrounded."

Again the door shook beneath the summons of an impatient fist.

"Chang Lin, here's visitors! Open the door, you yellow rat!"

"Open it," Dexter said. He was cold, deadly. "If you don't, they'll burst it in."

Chang Lin opened the door. They came in confidently, closing about the yellow man. One of them shut the door again and slipped the bolts. Bringing Chang Lin, they came forward into the lighted room.

"Here's another," one said, and they all laughed.

Without difficulty, Dexter recognized Spanish Joe. Swarthy, hawk faced, with great gold earrings dangling to his shoulders —he could not be mistaken. About his waist was a broad crimson sash, in which two knives and a revolver gleamed. He had black, piercing eyes, filled with strange lights and a sardonic mockery of all he saw.

"Who the hell are you?" he said sharply. "Seems to me I've seen you somewhere before."

"You're thinking of my father," Dexter said unemotionally.

"Your father? Who was he?"

"King Dexter."

Spanish Joe stiffened, and one hand dropped to his sash.

"You're King Dexter's son?"

"Yes."

The swarthy man laughed.

"By God, you're not so ready with your steel! If he stood where you're standing, I'd be dead now."

"I'll kill you soon enough," Dexter said.

"Aw, slip a knife into him, Joe," one of the men behind growled.

That was Carrion Crow, Dexter thought. A sallow man, this, with a great beak of a nose, dead eyes, and a loose mouth. He inspired in Dexter so strong a feeling of repulsion that he shuddered.

Beside him stood Pedro the Black, a giant, grinning negro, all rolling eyes and teeth. The others must be Sark and Finn, big men both, with the unmistakable stamp of the sea hard upon them. They stood one on either side of Chang Lin, holding his arms. Now, they threw him forward into the center of the room.

"Get to business, Joe," one said roughly.

Spanish Joe nodded.

"Guess we might as well. What about Dexter?"

"Slip a knife into him," Carrion Crow said again. He had, Dexter thought, the eyes of a dead fish.

Pedro the Black, laughing softly, shouldered his way forward.

"Me do dat," he said, fingering his knife. "Me do dat, Cap'n Joe."

"Go ahead, then," Spanish Joe said.

Pedro the Black leaped. Dexter twisted sideways, lithe as a cat, struck him full in the stomach with every ounce of strength in his great body. The negro crumpled, fell face downwards on the floor, moaning, feebly moving his limbs. Dexter stooped, caught him by the slack of trousers and coat, flung him contemptuously across the room.

Spanish Joe laughed.

"Guess you're King Dexter's son all right. Here's for you!"

His hand went to his sash, a knife gleamed in the smoky lamplight. Dexter felt the shock of the biting steel before he knew the throw had been made. His knees loosened and he slid rather than fell to the floor. The strength was gone from his body; it left him with the red blood that crept in a warm tide across his chest, and hurried down his ribs. He felt no pain; only a numbness where the knife bit deep. A numbness and a strange lethargy, a drowsiness and a desire for rest. A dark curtain dropped before his eyes. Through it came the voice of Spanish Joe, infinitely mocking.

"Father and son. . . ."

THE curtain lifted. But time had passed. Dexter, too weak to stir, opened his eyes. The gray mist slowly dissipated.

The table had been cleared of what it held, and full length on it, tied at ankle and wrist, Chang Lin lay. A thin cord, held at one end by Sark, at the other by Finn, was looped about his throat. He was stripped to the waist, and his yellow body was bloody with knife cuts. Above him bent Carrion Crow, knife in hand. The negro sat propped against the wall, watching with sick eyes.

"Guess you better tell us now," Spanish Joe said lazily, blowing smoke from a cigaret through his nostrils. "Or can you spare another bit of your hide?"

Chang Lin answered nothing.

"Haul away," Spanish Joe nodded.

Dexter saw the knife at work, saw the long strip of bloody skin in Carriou's hand. Chang Lin writhed madly; sweat sprang out on his forehead, and the veins of his temples seemed about to burst. But the cord had been tightened cruelly about his throat, and any sound he might have uttered died in his tortured lungs.

"Ease off," Spanish Joe said.

Slowly, they loosened the cord. Chang Lin drew in a great breath: but he made no sound.

"Guess you'll tell us where Harker's schooner lies now, eh?" Spanish Joe said.

Chang Lin drew in a second breath, expelled it slowly.

"Give me water," he whispered.

Spanish Joe gave him water in a cup. Sark held up his head. There was a queer, tense silence in the room while the yellow man drank.

"Now," Spanish Joe said, bending over.

Chang Lin spat the water in his face.

Carrion Crow caught his captain's upflung arm.

"Aw, what's that to what you done to him?" he said easily. "Gimme time, an' I'll make him pay for it."

Spanish Joe slipped back the knife he had drawn.

"Haul away," he said unemotionally.

The cord was tightened and again the torturer bent to his grisly task.

Dexter stirred. He moved a fraction of an inch, and found strength to move again. In the hushed silence of the room the sound he made was heard. Heads turned to him; even the black, pain blurred eyes of the Chinese rested on his face.

"He's harder to kill than a snake," Spanish Joe said in sardonic admiration.

"Listen," Dexter whispered. "Are you afraid of me, Spanish Joe?"

The Spaniard shook his head until the golden earrings danced and glittered.

"I could kill you like that." He snapped finger and thumb.

"Are you afraid of Chang Lin?"

"No."

"Then you will not kill us. And I will tell you—where Harker's schooner lies."

"Ah!" Spanish Joe said, softly. "How do you know?"

"We were to go there together, for—the gold."

"What gold?" Spanish Joe said cunningly.

"I am not lying," Dexter said in contempt. "Harker found gold, as you know. It is on the schooner. You swear to leave us—as we are?"

"I swear by the Virgin!" Spanish Joe said eagerly. "Tell, and we leave you as you are."

Dexter, slowly, looked at Chang Lin. The yellow man's eyes had filmed over; he seemed asleep.

"The schooner?" Spanish Joe prompted.

"She lies on a mud bank in Black River," Dexter said. "On a mud bank in—Black River. . . ."

"In Peru?" Spanish Joe said, shaking him.

"In Peru," Dexter mumbled.

Again the dark curtain dropped before his eyes. From beyond it, Spanish Joe's voice came weak and faint.

"Leave them be, Carrion; they'll die soon enough. I swore by the Virgin—do you want me damned? Guess he told the truth, too; Harker was always nosing round down there. . . ."

The voices and the footsteps died to silence.

WHEN Dexter stirred again the room was still, empty but for himself and the silent yellow man. An inch at a time, he moved towards the table, dragging himself across the floor by the strength of his forearms. He knew pain now, the burning agony of torn muscles and flesh and severed sinews. He sweated as he moved. The yellow man, head on one side, watched his slow progress with dull eyes.

Dexter gained the table, rested against a leg. A claspknife lay in the pocket of his coat; if he could reach and open it the rest would be easy enough.

He reached it after some delay; but the task of opening it proved almost beyond his powers. Only by digging the point of the blade into a crack in the floor did he at length succeed. After that he rested again before reaching up to cut the cords that bound Chang Lin.

Freed, the Chinese slid from the table, stood an instant, swaying, and fell. A groan burst from him as his lacerated chest struck the floor. He rose to his hands and knees, crawled across the room, opened the door of a cupboard against the wall. From this he took a squat green jar. He opened it, and a scent heavy as the scent of jungle orchids came to Dexter's nostrils. He closed his eyes in utter weariness.

When Dexter looked again, Chang Lin had smeared his chest with thick brown paste from the jar. His movements were quicker, surer, his face less haggard. He came to Dexter, opened his shirt, rubbed the brown paste into his wound. It burned an instant; then brought a wonderful coolness. Dexter sighed.

"Now sleep," Chang Lin whispered. "Tomorrow—vengeance."

Dexter, queerly, slept.

Followed a period of strange dreams. Dexter saw rivers black as jet flowing from tall mountains to the sea. He saw deep jungles, where beasts stalked stealthily in the shadows, watching him with hungry eyes.

He saw ships sailing, black against a crimson sun. Brigs, and schooners, and nks—in endless procession they slid cross the blood red disk. And still he saw hem, when the sun had set; for all the y was red.

Again he saw the ink black river and he brooding jungle about. He heard the oarse scream of macaws wheeling high, nd the splash of a jumping fish.

Sometimes, too, he discerned men among he trees, tiny, crouching figures hardly een there in the midday gloom, merging ith the shadow of leaf and frond.

He saw Spanish Joe and Finn, Carrion Crow and Sark and Pedro the Black. They visited him singly and together, in all places nd at all times. Now they were affable, now threatening, now indifferent. He cared nothing; for in his moments of sanity he knew they were but the figments of a dream, and somehow the knowledge stayed with him while they leered above his bed.

Most often of all he saw Chang Lin, soft stepping, catlike. And Chang Lin it was he saw when reason came back to him and he felt the warm blood stirring in his limbs.

"How long?" he whispered.

"Three days," said the yellow man.

Dexter was surprised. It had seemed longer. He tried to move, and realized his weakness.

"You must rest," Chang Lin said warningly. He himself seemed perfectly recovered.

"Rest?" Dexter said. "When Spanish Joe is heading for Black River?"

A quick flame leaped into the Celestial's eyes, then was gone.

"You will follow?"

Dexter laughed. The devil he had inherited from his father was loose in him. He felt the lust for blood.

"That is good," said Chang Lin contentedly.

CHAPTER II

TREACHERY

SPANISH JOE, while keeping his oath, had taken precautions, as Dexter speedily discovered in the days that followed.

Dexter lay a week in Chang Lin's house, while strength stole back to him. Drawing upon his tremendous vitality, he rose then, and unassisted walked back to the room above his yard. But the effort left him weak as a kitten, and he was more careful in the days that followed. With the exception of a sharp pain about his chest when he breathed deep, he was as well as ever in a fortnight. And soon that, too, vanished.

In the week of his convalescence he had not been idle. He bought stores and had them brought aboard the *Adventure*, and there safely stowed away. He bought rifles, one for himself and one for Chang Lin, heavy weapons taking a large bullet. For himself, again, he bought two .45 Colt's revolvers. These he took to wearing in his belt, becoming accustomed to the feel of them, to their sagging weight on his hips.

It seemed familiar, that weight against his thighs, the even rubbing of the weapons when he walked. As familiar almost as if he had worn them before and had resumed rather than started a habit. The smooth butts were in no way strange to his hands, falling naturally into the cup of his palm when he drew the weapons. And their possession, their presence in his belt, their closeness to his hands, brought keen pleasure to him. The half conscious control of a year ago was gone; he had entered another life.

The *Adventure* was being watched. He discovered it at noon one day, and was amused. Spanish Joe, then, had foreseen the possibility of pursuit? To Dexter's way of thought, that made things more interesting. It added spice to the game.

Idly, Dexter observed the man leaning there against the railing. He had a short pipe in his mouth, and seemed more interested in the lazy blue smoke floating from between his lips than in the sloop beside the wharf. But Dexter caught quick, sidelong glances towards the stores on deck, and others towards himself, and knew the man's attitude a pose.

Hitching at his belt, Dexter strolled ashore.

"Warm," he said, casually nodding to the watcher by the bollard.

"Yep," said the man.

"Want a job?"

"Depends on what it is," said the man guardedly.

Dexter nodded towards the sloop.

"I'm going for a bit of a cruise in her soon. Down Panama way. I'll want a few hands. Thirty a month and all found."

"Goin' soon?" said the man.

"Maybe a week," Dexter answered. "More likely ten days."

"Suits me," said the man, tapping the dottle from his pipe.

"I'll want two more," Dexter said. "If you know any good hands, bring them along."

"Guess I do," said the other.

Dexter lowered his voice.

"I don't want this spread around, see? Keep a tight mouth, and there's a bonus at the end of it for each of you."

"Now you're talkin', boss!"

"Drop along tomorrow, then. I may have some work for you."

Dexter saw Chang Lin that night.

"We sail in three days," he said.

The Chinese smiled.

"I am ready. We go alone?"

"Yes. I think that's best."

"You have all the self-confidence of your father," said Chang Lin. "It led him to his death."

Dexter gestured impatiently.

"Five to two! The odds are nothing. He tackled nine."

"We will be lucky," said Chang Lin, "if we ever leave the harbor."

Dexter thumped softly on the table with one clenched fist.

"I leave the harbor if I have to kill every man Spanish Joe left behind!" He flung away from the impassive Oriental. "We sail in three days, Chang Lin. Don't forget it. Or I sail alone."

"I will be there," Chang Lin said. "We leave at night?"

Dexter nodded.

"It might be better. I doubt if they'll keep watch, now that I've taken one of them on as a hand. Come at sundown."

Chang Lin came at sundown of the third day, like a shadow, a little bundle on his shoulder.

"See anyone?" Dexter asked.

"No. Are you ready?"

"Not only ready," Dexter said, grinning in the darkness. "Eager. Come on."

They went towards the wharf, their footsteps waking echoes in the silent street. It was the hour between day and night—work was done, but as yet the nighthawks had not come forth.

As they went, they peered about them with keen eyes, suspicious of every lurking shadow, of every faintest sound behind. They saw the harbor, and the dark tracery of masts against the sky. Lights gleamed here and there; far down, a schooner was being loaded in a glare of red. But all about them shadows lay, and a silence broken only by the lap of water on the weed grown piers.

"All clear," Dexter whispered. And as he spoke, a knife whipped past his face and stood quivering in the deck of the *Adventure*.

He wheeled like a flash, one gun out and ready; but he saw nothing. Only the shadows and the dark bulk of the wharfside yards looked on.

Chang Lin tugged at his sleeve.

"Come!"

"I'd like to get the man who threw that," Dexter said grimly.

"Come!" Chang said, more urgently. "There was but one man—he ran to get others. Come!"

Dexter nodded; there was no gain in delay. He cast off the ropes mooring the sloop, sprang aboard as she drifted sluggishly from the wharf. Another minute, and she was her own length into the harbor, swung gently outward by the tide. Dexter, great muscles straining, hoisted the foresail. Slowly, the *Adventure* began to move.

"Get to the wheel, Chang!"

There were men on the wharf, watching in silence. Dexter laughed aloud. He had not been meant to sail; of that he was convinced. Spanish Joe had meant to have him stopped, or killed; but the men entrusted with the job had been too careless.

The sloop went on; wharf and men were lost in the darkness astern. The great harbor gleamed before them, dim in the light of a star strewn sky. Dexter was conscious of a wild surge of exultation. This was a life he had never lived; but it was one he knew and loved. He felt the gentle heave of the deck beneath his feet, and joyed in the sense of freedom it brought. The sea was in his blood and his bones—to think otherwise was futility. It was his mistress, though until now he had denied it, living in a dream. The creak of the rigging overhead, the slap of the waves against the hull, were music in his ears.

Such was his mood he could not sleep, and dawn found him pacing the deck with tireless strides. In the cold gray light of ew day they passed the Golden Gates, d the *Adventure* curtsied daintily to the n sea and tossed its spume across her cks. Dexter breathed the salty air deep to his lungs. He felt as if he had escaped m prison, and this was the first taste of edom he had had for years.

In the past year he had studied naviga- on, and a week ago had worked out their urse. Now he took the wheel from the passive Oriental and sent him to the alley to prepare breakfast.

"And after that you can turn in," Dexter id. "All I want for the next few hours s to feel the wheel kicking in my hands, nd to watch the waves. Bring me up a ug of coffee and something to eat, then eep as long as you like."

The *Adventure* sailed like a witch. Dexter knew it, though he had never sailed boat of her size before. He knew it by he clean way she tossed the waves astern, y her long, easy roll through the water, y her narrow wake. In a wind like this, o schooner could hope to outdistance her. But he could not forget that the *Southern Witch* was three weeks ahead.

AS THE long days went by, his mood changed. The heady exultation left him, its place taken by a grim nflexibility of purpose. Nothing but eath, now, could turn him from his path. And for death he had little respect. Fear as to him an unknown quantity. He neant to kill Spanish Joe—of that he was o certain that he seldom gave it a thought. If luck was with him, he would wipe out he gang. In thinking of it, he was con-cious of no hesitancy; they deserved leath, at his hand or at another's. But ithout doubt he would kill Spanish Joe.

He gave little thought to the gold board Harker's schooner. If Chang Lin anted that, let him have it. He had rior right to it, having found Harker's ody. It was none of Dexter's concern. le had enough; wealth only spoiled life. t was the fight for wealth that counted, ot the wealth itself. The work and the mbition were more than the success. He as content. If ever he returned, it would e to the yard on Captain's Wharf, not o a mansion in the hills. All the gold in he world was as nothing when compared o the satisfaction of a job well done.

Usually uncompromising in his ideas, Dexter found himself curiously undecided with regard to Chang Lin. Thrown now into close contact with the Oriental, he began to wonder if his first estimate of the yellow man's character had been wrong. Reasonably, there seemed no proof that this was so. Instinctively, Dexter felt that proof existed, could he but find it. Not that he was anxious to find it, so long as Chang Lin proved trustworthy; but Dexter was convinced that the yellow man was deeper far than he had at first suspected, and might bear watching.

From what he had heard of them, the Chinese burrowed by underground ways to gain their ends, revealing their real purpose only when it had been served. They were subtle, and not above treachery. He had no reason to believe that Chang Lin was either subtle or treacherous; but he felt that the Celestial might be so, given the chance. Dexter decided to be watchful. Time would tell.

They sailed the *Adventure* southward, under blazing suns and full faced moons, over the seas of a deep, unforgettable blue. The winds held fair and steady; and only once was there a storm. Then, Dexter stood at the wheel for sixty hours, joying in his great strength and his endurance, laughing as the waves foamed past, mountains high above the little sloop.

"Tomorrow we reach Black River," Dexter said one day.

Chang Lin nodded in the Eastern manner by shaking his head.

"And then?"

"Whatever comes," Dexter said carelessly.

He had no plan of campaign, nor any clear cut idea as to what he meant to do. Everything depended on what they found at Black River. If possible, Dexter meant to arrive unseen by the men on the *Southern Witch*. That would give him greater scope, and allow him to find how matters stood.

Of course, there was always the possibility that Spanish Joe had found Harker's schooner, taken the gold, and gone his way, remaining in Black River no more than a few hours. But somehow, while admitting the possibility, Dexter doubted that. Harker had been lost twelve years; in that time his schooner could have been swallowed by the mud, or broken to matchwood by a deluge from the mountains inland. Spanish Joe, then, would remain some considerable time in search of her. Again, the river might have filled, become impassable to sea going craft. That, too, would necessitate delay. It was possible that Spanish Joe was gone; but it was very improbable.

Even if he had, Dexter reflected grimly, he could be followed. Black River need not be the scene of vengeance. Dexter thought of it as such only because Spanish Joe was likely to be there.

Vengeance . . . Queer how things had changed in the last few weeks. Until Chang Lin, that eventful night, had mentioned the Spaniard, Dexter had thought of him seldom indeed. Spanish Joe had been a name to him, no more. A name fraught with bitter memories, true, but still a name.

The knowledge of Spanish Joe's presence in San Francisco had altered that. The name had gained a personality, something to be hated and hurt. Still the object of the hatred remained formless, unseen.

Only the appearance of Spanish Joe himself had brought Dexter's cold passion to a leaping flame. That scene in the Dutch saloon had gained a vividness, a reality, hitherto unknown. The distant and almost forgotten killing had gained a sudden intimacy. And from this came the desire for vengeance, where no desire had been before, and the fierce determination to take a life for a life. More—to take five lives for one.

Dexter, now that the moment approached, was coldly ruthless about it. These men had killed his father; he would kill them. It seemed a just code to him, particularly as the men were at liberty to defend themselves, and were fully capable of doing so. But, just or not, he had made it his code, and would abide by it.

He would fight fair; he knew that. He would give them the chance they had denied his father. At thought of it, he laughed a little, grimly. They had been nine to one, and he was one to five. Yet he felt confident of vengeance. He was impatient for it.

THEY sighted land the following noon, and through his glasses Dexter made out a break that might have been the wide mouth of a river. Until the sun set, they hung offshore, cursing the lazy hours; then brought the sloop in under cover of darkness, all lights doused. She slid in smoothly, with never the creak of a spar to betray her coming, her wake a thin white line of phosphorescence astern.

The land rose before them, crowned with jungle, black and sinister. Dexter swung the wheel, and the sloop turned her broadside to that unfriendly shore and stole along in shadows cast by the rising moon.

"I wonder is this Black River?" Dexter whispered.

"Yes," Chang Lin said emphatically. "Harker described it; and this is what he described."

"It is well named," Dexter said.

The *Adventure* went on, with only the ripple from her sides and the jungle sliding past, to tell she moved. The mouth of a river opened wide before her, a river flowing sluggishly between high banks of trees that whispered in the warm night breeze. It was a placid river, its surface here unbroken, placidly mirroring the sickle of the newborn moon.

"Black River!" Chang Lin breathed. His eyes were bright, his head bent forward as he peered upstream. He reminded Dexter, then, of some voracious bird of prey watching the dying tremors of its victim. "Black River!" the yellow man whispered again.

Dexter nodded, swung the sloop into the current. She made but little way against it, for the wind was light, broken by the jungle and the mountains towering inland.

They saw no sign of the *Southern Witch*; but that meant nothing, as the banks of the river were cleft by creeks, in any of which the schooner could be hidden. Into one of these, as day dawned, Dexter brought the sloop, noting with satisfaction how the green closed in about her with each bend and wriggle of the gentle stream, hiding her from the eyes of anything but the brilliant macaws in the trees above.

"Better rest today," Dexter said. "We'll take a cruise around ashore tonight."

Chang Lin nodded. But when Dexter, late that afternoon, awoke, the yellow man was gone. He had taken nothing, not even the rifle Dexter had bought for him. He had gone ashore with only his knife and whatever secret lay behind his impassive face to bear him company.

Dexter fell into a cold fury of rage. Of late he had suspected the Oriental of using him as a tool, to be dropped when his utility was past. This, it seemed, confirmed it. But it ended here. Come how he might, Chang Lin would never return to 'Frisco by the *Adventure*. Not unless he had some good excuse for his disappearance.

Dexter securely moored the sloop to trees, bow and stern, and when darkness came went ashore with the two Colt's in his belt. During the day he had seen or heard nothing to prove that Spanish Joe was in the vicinity; only the noises of the jungle came to him in the burning afternoon, and he saw no more than the macaws in the green.

Ashore, he followed the creek until it met the river, and then went slowly upstream, picking a way as best he could through the tangled undergrowth. The moon had not yet risen, and here beneath the trees the darkness was intense; but the river showed with a dull gleam, revealed by the brightening stars.

He went warily, knowing himself on strange ground. This, he thought with a grim smile, was his first hunt; undue precipitance might bring it abruptly to an end. When he knew how the land lay, then he could move.

The river, here close to the mouth, was wide and unbroken, a placid sheet of water moving slowly to the sea. But when the moon rose Dexter saw islands ahead, long, narrow banks of green thrust sharply from the gleaming water. And between two of these he saw the *Southern Witch*.

She lay at anchor, a long, low vessel of rakish lines, darker than the water on which she floated. She showed no vestige of a light, and lay in silence, a sinister vessel in a sinister setting. Dexter stiffened at sight of her, and his hands went to his belt. Then he laughed. All his fears had been groundless—Spanish Joe was here.

He leaned against a tree and watched the schooner. He saw no movement aboard her, nor any sign of life. She might have been a ship of the dead, so deserted did she appear. But Dexter knew different. Spanish Joe was observing elementary precautions, that was all.

FOR an hour Dexter watched her, while the moon rose slowly. It turned the river to gold and the jungle to a mass of shadow where things moved with the soft whisper of stealth. Dexter knew himself under observation by the creatures of the night; but he cared little for that. Creatures infinitely more dangerous were out there on the silent schooner.

Stirring, at length, he took one gun in his teeth, and so waded into the quiet river. He swam out slowly, heading a little up against the current, followed and preceded by a series of gentle ripples that caught the light of the moon in streaks of brightness. He swam not directly towards the schooner but towards one of the islands that sheltered her.

Ashore, he crouched an instant, listening. No sound came to him but the even trickle of water from his clothes. The schooner now was hidden from him by the greenery in front. He crept into and through the undergrowth until he saw water ahead and the bulk of the silent vessel. No men were on her deck; he saw no sign of a watch. Careful in some things, Spanish Joe was careless in others.

Dexter moved upstream silently, and again entered the water, letting the current carry him down towards the *Southern Witch*. She loomed above him, gigantic against the stars. Halting himself against her stem, he listened again. No sound came from above; he heard only the stealthy noises of the jungle and the river.

He reached up, gripped the wire that stayed her bowsprit, and pulled himself from the water. An instant more, and he crouched on deck, peering about him with quick eyes.

The deck was deserted. He moved aft to the cabin companionway and halted by it, scarcely breathing, muscles tense. A movement in the shadows would have been sufficient to explode him into violent action. But he saw no movement. Here in the open he was alone.

He heard, now, a murmur of voices from below. He distinguished Carrion Crow's rumble and the sharper tones of Spanish Joe. He grinned a little, mirthlessly. He had found his prey.

Like a shadow, he slid down the steep companionway, gun up, eyes probing the darkness. It was very dark down here, a cave of blackness relieved only by the strip of light beneath a door somewhere there in front. Towards this he moved, softly as a cat for all his bulk. He reached the door and crouched against it, listening.

"Seems to me," Carrion Crow said, "we been fooled. Say what you like, Joe, it's plain enough. Harker's schooner ain't here."

Followed a murmur of assent, into which Spanish Joe's voice cut sharply.

"No man in hell, earth or heaven can fool me with a lie! The *Silver Queen* was here once, if she ain't here now. And if she ain't here now, it's because she's been broken up. Guess you've got to convince me she ain't here, though."

Crow's voice came again.

"Dexter said she was on a mud flat."

"Dexter was tellin' the truth, or believed he was."

"But there ain't a mud bank within twenty miles, Joe."

A fist pounded on wood.

"It's twelve years since Harker vanished, ain't it? Mud banks change in twelve years, I guess."

Carrion Crow grunted.

"You've got to show me. It's pretty sheltered here, an' there's no current to speak of. She could lie here a hundred years without breakin' up. If she ain't broke up, where is she?"

"The river may have shifted," Spanish Joe said. "These rivers do. Tomorrow we'll go through the bush and see if we can come across any sign of an old bed. If we can't, we'll go upstream and see if we can locate the gold Harker found."

"Into the dwarf country?"

Spanish Joe swore fluently.

"Guess there's no dwarf living can make me keep my hands off gold! Nor any man, either."

"No?" Dexter said. He had swung the door open, and stood inside it, gun up, eyes piercing. "Don't move! I'm only looking for an excuse to shoot. Good! Stay like that." He closed the door behind him. "Now we can talk."

"Where in hell did you come from?" Spanish Joe demanded. He seemed confident, unafraid. "Guess you've a nerve, walking in like this!"

"I came to tell you something," Dexter said. "I'm going to kill you. Not now; but the next time we meet. You can run, but I'll follow, and I'll kill you if it's on the other side of the world. Not only you, Spanish Joe. The five of you. Now I'm going. When I see you again, I shoot. Don't forget it."

A hand swept across the table, dashed the lamp to the floor.

Dexter dropped sideways, crouched utterly motionless against the cabin wall. He heard the double thud of two knives into the door, and from the opposite corner a revolver spat lead and flame in a continuous stream. Still he did not move, and when the gun was empty a dreadful silence fell. It was broken at length by Spanish Joe.

"Guess he must be dead," said Spanish Joe. "Strike a match, someone."

"Not me," came the voice of Sark.

"You're afraid?" the Spaniard sneered.

"You're darn right I'm afraid."

"Guess I'll do it myself."

Dexter, bursting into action, leaped the intervening distance, caught him, flung him across the cabin with brutal force. There were surging bodies about him, voices yelling, hands clutching at him. He brushed them aside, sprang to the door, wrenched at the handle.

It resisted him. The door was locked. He remembered now, in that split second, that the key had been on the outside at the time of his entry.

A body smashed against his knees, almost bringing him down. He kicked at it, and grinned at the broken scream that followed. He bent his massive shoulders, heaved himself at the door. It gave in splinters, and he stumbled out into the passage. An instant he crouched at the foot of the companionway, peering back, then leaped up and out on deck. A gun roared in the cabin, but the bullet went wide.

There was a man on deck, back to the rails, at bay before the crew of the *Southern Witch,* a knife in each hand. Dexter, leaping for the side, recognized the crouched figure, and knew who had locked the cabin door. He fired into the group of men, and one dropped. Like a cat Chang Lin sprang over the rails. Dexter let him go. A time of reckoning would come later. Just now, the safest course was to get ashore as quickly as possible. He dropped into the water, and struck out for the island a few score yards distant.

Spanish Joe was on deck, screaming in his anger. Carrion Crow roared for a boat. A bullet splashed spray over Dexter's head. He dived, swam under water while his breath lasted. When he came to the surface again the island was but a few yards distant. He scrambled ashore, plunged into the shelter of the undergrowth. Bullets whipped about him, bringing down a shower of leaves and small twigs. Bending double, he ran upstream some distance, then halted to listen. The firing had ceased, but he heard the splash of oars, and the creaking of rowlocks. He smiled grimly to himself. Here in the dark jungle, pursuer and pursued were on equal terms.

THEY had landed. He heard them crashing through the bush, calling to one another, like so many dogs baying on the trail of a lion. He tilted his head to one side, listening intently, separating voice from voice, mentally noting the location of each of the gang. Finn was on this side, next the water, with inside him, Pedro the Black. The line across the island consisted of Crow, the Spaniard, and Sark. There were others; but Dexter thought only of the five. They alone interested him.

They were dividing, spreading out more widely as the island broadened. The distance between Finn and the negro was greater than it had been. Dexter crouched behind the bole of a tree. The sound Finn made as he plunged onward, bursting his way through the undergrowth, revealed his position to a foot. He was close, quite close. Dexter became still as the tree he touched.

He saw the bulk of the big seaman, a shadow darker than the shadows in which it moved. Finn was roaring.

"Guess we'll root him out, mates. I'll carve him into chunks. He can't get into the water without us seein' him."

He plunged on, great arms working, peering about him in the inky shadows.

Dexter rose before him, took him by the throat, dashed his head against the tree, squeezed the life from him in terrible silence. He struggled, flinging himself from side to side, tearing at Dexter's wrists with impotent hands. He had dropped his gun at that first onslaught, and seemed otherwise unarmed. With Dexter's weight across his chest he could do nothing.

Dexter rose, wiped his hands on his trousers. He felt unclean. The savage in him had come to the surface and remained unsubdued. For the present, at least, he was content that it should be so. But the contact of his fingers on the dead man's throat had sickened him. And at the same time it brought with it a strange, bitter exultation, a fierce rioting of the blood that seemed to steal away his reason, and leave him slave to his instincts. He fought against savages, and was a savage himself.

Suddenly he awoke to the fact that a queer, tense silence had fallen on the island. It was shattered by a bellow from Carrion Crow.

"Where'n hell's Jim?"

No answer came, and Crow called loudly:

"Jim, ahoy! Where in hell are you?"

Again he received no reply, and from further across the island Spanish Joe's voice came.

"Guess you better look for him. Keep together more."

Dexter moved again, swiftly and silently upstream. He could with ease have circled back and swum to the mainland; but not yet had he wearied of the game. They seemed the pursuers, but in reality he knew them for his prey.

He heard them crowding out towards the river bank, talking together in more subdued tones. Then there was a short silence, ended when Crow called to the Spaniard.

"We got him, Joe."

The Spaniard halted.

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's dead."

"Dead?"

"Deader'n a rat!"

"The hell you say!" Spanish Joe came running, Sark at his heels.

"Keep closer, mates," Crow called. "He's this side. Shoot if you see him move."

Dexter saw the glow of a match where the dead man lay.

"He's been strangled," Spanish Joe snarled.

Dexter slipped on between the whispering trees. Fleshy leaves touched his face like cold fingers, long tendrils plucked at his feet. But he made little sound. It seemed second nature to him to move quietly here, where instinct guided him.

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He reached the end of the island, faced a narrow strip of water. Beyond it was another island, smaller than the one on which he stood, covered with lower, denser bush. He listened a moment, locating the pursuit. It was still well behind. He slipped into the water, struck out with long, easy strokes.

They saw his head as he neared the opposite shore, and once again he had to dive to escape the humming bullets. The boat, two men in it, had followed upstream. Crow bellowed for it, and it came hastily as Dexter scrambled ashore. In it they continued the chase.

Dexter slipped along close to the water. They would, he told himself, grow careless again, and separate; and then. . . .

The bush was very thick along the bank, and he cut inland in an attempt to find some easier path. The attempt was futile. A luxury of leaves and twigs pressed in about him. He was surrounded by a darkness through which thin arrows of moonlight fell slantingly.

He sensed rather than saw some great bulk upreared before him, like a wall of shadow. He touched it, found it solid, smooth though covered with a skin of moss. He glanced up, getting it against the sky, and found it high above him, though below the level of the bush. It reminded him of something he had seen earlier that night—it reminded him of the *Southern Witch*, seen from the level of the water as he drifted towards her. Then he knew he had found Harker's schooner, the *Silver Queen*.

He laughed softly, noiselessly. Spanish Joe had searched for a mud bank, forgetting that in this climate a mud bank could turn to an island heavy with trees in the space of a few years. That was what had happened. Here before him was Harker's schooner, deep sunken in a sea of green, much as Harker had left her except that her masts were gone. And Spanish Joe's vessel lay within a few cables' length of her. Dexter saw humor in that.

He stiffened abruptly. A head had appeared over the side of the schooner, and looked down at him in silence. A wandering beam of moonlight caught it, held it the space of a breath, touched it with softest silver. Then, without a sound, it vanished.

Dexter came abruptly to life. His pursuers had landed on the end of the island; he heard their voices, and the crash of their progress through the bush. Careless of the noise he made, he headed at a run for the river, bursting a path for himself by main strength. Spanish Joe and the others must not discover Harker's schooner.

They heard him, turned towards him, shouting. He found the river, plunged into it, swam with all his strength for the mainland from which he had come.

They had reached the open, and were firing. He heard the smash of the bullets on the water, felt their spray on his head. He dived, swam beneath the surface, came up, and dived again. He was near the shore now, but they had brought the boat around, and followed desperately. He gained the bank, scrambled up it, plunged into the bush.

They did not follow. He heard them rest on their oars a while, then turn back towards the schooner. Spanish Joe swore continually, snarled at the rowers.

Dexter went to the edge of the river, watched them until they boarded the *Southern Witch*. He wished to be certain they did not return to the second island, where Harker's schooner lay. Only when they vanished below, leaving the boat moored alongside, did he move, striking swiftly downstream towards the creek where his sloop lay hidden.

He was a long time falling asleep that night. His brain was busy, and refused to rest. Firstly, there was the affair of Chang Lin. Chang Lin had locked the cabin door on the *Southern Witch*, hoping that Dexter, trapped would kill and be killed. Dexter knew that. He understood it. Chang Lin desired his rivals to remove one another. It was very simple, and essentially Oriental.

Secondly, there was the discovery of Harker's vessel. Dexter believed himself alone in the knowledge of her location. And of all present he was the only man who had not searched for her. The humor in that appealed to him.

And lastly, there was the head which had appeared over the side of the *Silver Queen*. Dexter thought of this most of all, for it had been the head of a girl.

CHAPTER III

BLOOD AND GOLD

IT WAS night again before Dexter left the sloop. With the first swift fall of darkness he went ashore, his blood running strongly, every muscle in him impatient for the action he craved.

He had no plan, nor any clear idea as to what he meant to do. Let the events of the night shape themselves as they would; he was ready for anything. Last night he had made his first kill—tonight he would make another. Finn he had considered the least important of the five, one of the pawns. Sark came under the same heading. But he would kill Sark, given the opportunity. And he would kill the other three.

As before, he moved upstream until opposite the *Southern Witch*. She had not changed her position, but still lay between the two islands, in darkness but for the gleam of the river where it broke about her sides. The moon had not yet risen, and she was no more than a shadow among shadows, a vague shape on the blackness of the water.

Dexter watched her a while, then moved on upstream until he came opposite the second island, where Harker's vessel lay. It held for him a strange fascination, this brooding isle where for an instant he had glimpsed the face of a girl kissed by a beam of moonlight. Who was she? And whence had she come? Try as he might, Dexter could find no answer to either question. She was one of the mysteries of this strange river, a mystery he meant to solve before the dawn.

He swam to the island, shook himself, slipped into the bush.

Without difficulty he found the schooner. He circled her in silence, stealthy as a hunting leopard. She lay canted a little to one side, her keel deep in the fertile soil. The bush had pressed in about her until she seemed part of it, different only in her solidity.

She lay in silence broken by the thin cheep of fruit bats and the soft murmur of the river. Dexter crouched a while, one ear against the moss grown hull, and heard no sound of movement within, nor anything to make him think the schooner other than deserted. Could he have seen that face in imagination alone? Could it have been an illusion born of the moonlight and the pitchy shadows? He laughed at himself; but the uneasy doubt remained.

Finding a port-hole near the ground, he climbed to the rails, and dropped lightly on deck. There he stood a moment, listening, piercing as best he could the shadows that lay about. Nothing moved; he was alone.

He went aft slowly, on cautious feet. Beside the deckhouse he halted again, and again heard nothing.

He was at the head of the cabin companionway when there came from the bush beside the schooner the sound of some heavy body in movement. He crouched, became motionless. Here was action.

He saw a hand come over the rails, an arm, a head. A body rose from the shadows.

It was Pedro the Black. Hanging there, he peered about him, then drew himself up and slung one leg over the rails. Next instant he was on deck. Again he peered about him, big head thrust forward; and again he failed to see Dexter, motionless there beside the companionway. He took one step forward, another, and another. The deck caved in beneath him, and he vanished with a guttural cry.

Dexter did not move. He wished to be certain the negro was alone.

Moments passed. Pedro the Black was moving about, down below, swearing in his broken English. He made no attempt to summon aid. Dexter decided the rest of the gang was not in the vicinity. He stole to the edge of the ragged hole, peered down. The rotten wood groaned beneath his weight.

Pedro the Black had seen him; Dexter knew that from the sudden silence below. He himself could see nothing; the hold was dark as the mouth of hell. He chuckled.

"Who's dat?" said the negro softly.

Dexter dropped into the hold.

The negro was somewhere on his left, breathing deeply. Pedro the Black was afraid, or he would have attacked immediately, before Dexter had recovered from his fall. Dexter circled about him, locating as exactly as possible his position. The darkness down here was utterly impenetrable.

The negro was moving now, softly, on naked feet. They made little sound, for the bottom of the hold was covered with a thick dust, like powdered wood.

Dexter stumbled, fell. Pedro the Black was on him like a cat; the sweep of his knife missed Dexter's ribs by an inch. Dexter gripped his wrist, twisted it with fingers of steel. The negro howled sharply and let go. They rolled together in the choking dust, now one uppermost, now the other, great muscles straining, their breath coming in hard, quick gasps.

Strong as he was, Pedro the Black had met a stronger. He fought desperately, using every trick a life of fighting had taught him. He used his teeth until with a hard driven elbow Dexter smashed them down his throat.

Dexter was merciless. Again the savage in him ruled. He had the black beneath him, one knee on his chest. He shifted that knee a little, jerked down on it with all his weight, and felt a rib crunch in. The negro screamed, threw him off with a strength born of agony, scrambled away.

He was out somewhere there to the right, whimpering softly. Dexter circled about him in the darkness, one hand out. The black was turning, turning, keeping his face towards the unseen menace.

Dexter rose to his feet, leaped, feet first. He struck the negro in the chest, smashed him over, fell on him. Pedro the Black had him by the throat, the strength of a madman in his fingers.

Only then did Dexter fully realize the power within him. He gripped the negro by the middle, lifted him, threw him with all the strength of his body. Pedro the Black smashed against the wall of the hold, fell, lay still. Dexter leaped on him, took him by the throat. But the negro was dead. His back was broken.

The savage in Dexter was again subdued. He felt vaguely sorry for the dead negro, though without regretting his act. Pedro had deserved death. A hundred times he had earned it. That he had died at Dexter's hands was no more than chance.

Dexter felt cautiously about him in the gloom. He went the length and breadth of the hold without finding any means of exit. Even when the moon came up and sent a broadening spear of light through the hole in the deck, he searched in vain. The deck was a good ten feet above his head; he could not hope to reach it. He tried to climb, but the rotten timbers of the hull broke to powder in his grasp. He was trapped. At least, until day came he was a prisoner. Even then he might not escape.

THE moon was an hour risen when he saw a head dark against the fragment of sky, and gathered his legs under him in preparation for any emergency. Then a queer thrill shot through him. This was no man, but a girl, who peered down into the shadows of the hold. He did not move, and made no sound; he knew she could not see him.

"Who is there?" she called softly.

Dexter answered nothing. Somehow he guessed that if he spoke she would vanish in silence, as she had come.

She called again, more loudly now; and again he was silent. Then for a long time she knelt there, peering down into the blackness. Dexter read in her attitude a doubt, an indecision, perhaps a little fear.

She vanished. Still he did not stir, knowing she would reappear.

When she did, it was with a rope in her hands. She let down one end into the hold, hesitated a moment, then slid down it lightly as a boy. So she stood, one hand at her breast, a figure of slender loveliness in the white splash of moonlight.

She wore a dress of some dark cloth caught tight above her breast, leaving shoulders and arms free, and exposing the smooth beauty of her throat. Her skirt reached to her knees, and her feet were bare. As she stood there, peering about her into the darkness, Dexter knew he had never before seen anything so lovely.

At last, releasing the rope, she moved a few steps forward, and stumbled against the body of the negro. She bent down, touched it. As she cried out, Dexter cursed himself for a fool to forget its position, its very existence. She jumped to the rope, caught it, swung herself up hand over hand. For all his quickness, Dexter had little time to spare, and gripped her ankles only as she neared the top. She struggled fiercely, though without a sound. Then her strength gave and she fell back into his arms.

"Please don't be afraid," Dexter said awkwardly, setting her on her feet. "There's nothing to be afraid of, really."

Breathing quickly, she drew back from him a step.

"Who—who are you?"

"My name is Dexter," he said simply and waited. Before solving the mystery of her presence here he must relieve her fears.

"What do you want here?"

"I followed some men," Dexter said.

"Why?"

"They killed my father, and I meant to kill them."

"Is this one of them?" Her tone was readier now.

"It is."

"Are they bad men?"

"Very bad," Dexter said gravely. It was an inadequate way of describing Spanish Joe and his comrades.

She nodded.

"So my daddy said."

"Who is your father?" Dexter asked, keeping his voice well under control, though excitement threatened to render it unsteady.

She seemed surprised that he did not know.

"My father? Why, Cap'n Harker!" She said it with an odd little inflection of tone, as if, unconsciously, she mimicked someone older and gruffer of voice than she herself.

"Captain Harker!"

"Of course." She glanced into the darkness that clothed Pedro the Black, and shuddered. "Come up on deck. I'm afraid of that."

"He can't harm you," Dexter said gently. "You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"I was at first," she confessed. "But now I'm not. I like you now." She was frank as a child about it.

"You've lived here all your life?" Dexter said, one hand on the rope.

"Not all my life. Once, I lived somewhere else; but I can't remember much of that. It was when I was young."

Dexter went up the rope, hand over hand, pulled himself out on deck, turned to help her out. She came up lightly, and he caught one wrist. As he did so, he saw her eyes widen in a look of fear. Something dug sharply into the middle of his back.

"Well, well, well!" said Carrion Crow mockingly. "You've sure an eye for the girls, Mister Dexter. Don't move, or it'll be my painful duty to blow your backbone out through your belly. Hey, Joe, look what I found!"

"If it ain't Dexter!" Spanish Joe said in tones of wonder. "Here, boys, run a couple of twists o' rope around his arms. Quick about it!" He bent, slipped the guns from Dexter's belt. "Move, and you're a dead man. Guess you can do without these."

The girl had slid back into the hold. Crow bellowed at her.

"Hey, you, come up! Or d'you want me to come down an' *bring* you up?"

"Better come up," Dexter said evenly. If Crow went down for her he would handle her roughly.

She appeared in the splash of moonlight below, looking up. Her gaze was on him, and on him alone.

"You said—to come up?"

He nodded.

"It would be better."

She came up slowly, until Crow caught her and lifted her to the deck. Dexter, now, was bound cruelly, his arms twisted behind his back, his wrists tortured by the rope about them. He saw her shrink, and felt a wild anger surge in him. But he was helpless. The time for action would come later, when his hands were free.

"So he brought his lady love with him?" Crow said, leering. "Me, I like your taste, Dexter."

He drew her towards him, crooked an arm about her neck, kissed her. She struggled futilely, her face twisted in a grimace of repulsion, her little hands beating against his back. Crow laughed, kissed her again.

"I'm sure a lady killer, Joe."

"Cut it out," Spanish Joe said shortly. "We've no time for that sort of thing. Where's the gold, Dexter?"

"Search me," Dexter said, grinning. "You know as much as I do."

"If I thought you were lying," Spanish Joe said coldly, "I'd carve you into ribbons."

Dexter shrugged.

"It's easy to talk like that when my hands are tied."

The Spaniard struck him across the face.

"I killed your father and I'll kill you. But I'll take longer about it, and you'll be glad to die. We'll leave the gold till tomorrow, Carrion, when we'll have some light on the job. Now that we've got Dexter there's no fear of it bein' lifted."

He turned again to Dexter, and his tone sharpened suddenly.

"Where's the nigger?"

"In the hold," Dexter said coolly, nodding towards the broken deck.

Spanish Joe showed no surprise.

"Go down and get him," he said, beckoning his men forward. He watched with interest while they hoisted the body of the dead negro into the moonlight.

Pedro the Black was a ghastly sight. His mouth had been smashed by Dexter's elbow and was not pleasant to look at. He lay close to the deck, slack as a wet rag, sightless eyes staring at the moon. Unpleasant in life, now he was a horror. Spanish Joe stared down at him with an expressionless face. He was utterly callous. Then he looked at Dexter.

"You did that with your hands?"

"Yes."

Spanish Joe nodded.

"You're your father's son. But you've butted your head against the wrong wall, same as he did."

He strode to the side, flung one leg over the rails.

"Bring them along."

DEXTER went quietly, biding his time. The girl followed, held by Crow, who seemed afraid she might slip away. They dropped to the ground, wound their way through the bush. On the edge of the river was moored a boat into which they crowded. Dexter sat in the middle, Spanish Joe facing him, a gun across his knees. Spanish Joe was taking no chances. He guessed Dexter's strength and he knew his own. Only a .45 bullet through the heart could stop Dexter once his hands were free.

They reached the schooner and climbed aboard. Spanish Joe led the way into the cabin, raised the flame of the lamp. Sark, entering last, shut the door. A new door had been fitted, Dexter noticed. A smile came to his lips.

"You've brought this on yourself, Dexter," Spanish Joe said. "Left alone, we're harmless and friendly. Touch us on the raw, and we raise hell." He made himself comfortable in a chair, the gun still in his hand. "You killed Finn and Pedro, and tonight we'll do things to you that'll make you wish you'd never been born. You saw us working on Chang Lin; that was only a beginning." He said it smilingly, as if he jested; but a cold ferocity underlay his words.

"An' we'll make a ship's pet of your lady love," Crow sneered. "Me, I'll be right happy to teach her her tricks."

The fury in Dexter, no longer to be restrained, flared to the surface.

"Harm a hair of her head and I'll roa you alive!"

He strained at his bonds until the vei on his forehead seemed about to burst but the rope refused to give so much a fraction of an inch. He desisted, breath ing deeply. His eyes flamed on Crow.

"Listen to me, you skunk! Just now I'm——"

Crow dashed a hand across his mouth

"Stow the gab! Who's master here, m or you?"

"Neither," said a cold voice. "I am *Drop that gun, Spanish Joe!"*

The door had opened quietly, and i the aperture an old man stood. He ha a gun in each hand, his fingers crooked about the triggers, his blue eyes fierce.

"Stand still and keep your hands easy!"

Without looking at her, he spoke to the girl:

"Have they hurt you, Nan?"

She shook her head, whispered: "No."

Spanish Joe exploded into speech.

"Who in hell are you?"

"Captain Silas Harker," said the ol man grimly. "At your service." Hi glance flickered to Dexter. "Who ar you?"

The girl plucked at his coat.

"He's not one of them, daddy. He wa nice to me."

"My name is Dexter," Dexter said.

"King Dexter's son?"

"Yes."

One of the steady guns pointed at Crow's chest.

"Loose off those ropes."

Slowly Crow obeyed. Dexter chafed his wrists, smiling to feel his muscles in smooth action.

"Now move back against the wall, you three."

Sark and Crow obeyed; Spanish Joe came lazily to his feet.

"Keep your hands in sight!" the old man snapped.

Spanish Joe struck with the quicknes of a snake. The knife jumped from his belt, flashed across the cabin, sank to the hilt in Harker's side. The old man wilted, leaned back against the door, guns sagging, pumping lead into the floor at his feet. The girl screamed.

Dexter was in action. He tore the gun from Crow's hand, battered out his brains with the butt. Sark closed with him. They smashed against the table, and the lamp fell, flickered an instant, and went out. Dexter struck at Sark's head and hit his shoulder. Spanish Joe was on him now, tearing at his throat. For the instant it took him to kill Sark, Dexter ignored the Spaniard. He took Sark's neck in the crook of one arm and broke it with a single, awful effort.

"Now you, Spanish Joe," he whispered in the Spaniard's ear. "Remember King Dexter."

A moment later, Dexter rose to his feet alone. He felt strange, lightheaded, almost giddy. An instant he leaned against the wall, recovering; then stooped, searched Crow's body, found matches. The glow of one showed him Harker on the floor, the girl bent over him. He found another lamp, lit it, set it on the broken table.

"My father is dying," said the girl unemotionally.

"Dying?" Dexter lifted him gently, laid him in the chair so shortly vacated by Spanish Joe. "I don't think so."

"I'm going all right," the old man said, opening his eyes. "Dexter, I knew your father. A straighter man never lived. You're the dead spit of him." He seemed to wander a little. "They were after the gold, all of them. Men will do things for gold they'd do for nothing else. But you can take it now, Dexter, and keep it for —her."

He sighed, lay back in the chair, his eyes closed. The girl sobbed gently. Dexter slid an arm about her shoulders, awkwardly comforted her. She rested in his arms. Across her dark head he looked into the eyes of Chang Lin.

"Do not move," the yellow man said. He held a revolver loosely. "Where is this gold?"

Dexter snarled.

"Find it!"

The gun came up a little, until it pointed at his chest.

"Twelve years I have waited and four men I have killed. Am I to lose all now? Where is this gold?"

Dexter tensed his muscles. He had one chance in a million. If he flung the girl aside, and dived . . . Chang Lin might miss. It was one chance in a million; but it was better than none.

Chang Lin read his thoughts, and the yellow finger tightened on the trigger. Dexter stood nearer to death then than he had ever stood before.

"Chang Lin!"

It was a whisper from the dying man in the chair. Chang Lin stiffened, whirled. Harker's shot broke his action. He fell back through the doorway, dead, his feet in red light and his head in shadow.

Harker raised himself a little, his eyes bright.

"I waited twelve years for that shot. He's dead, Dexter?"

"He's dead."

"Good! I suppose you're curious? I'll tell you——

"CHANG LIN was cook aboard the *Silver Queen*. I heard rumors of gold here and decided to try it out. We found gold far up and worked it for a year. Then, coming down, we ran on a mud bank. There had been rain in the hills and the river was in flood. We tried to get her off, but it was no use. The river was dropping hard. In a day she was high and dry.

"We decided to take to the boats. As you know, I had my daughter Nancy with me—her mother was dead and I brought her everywhere. She was nine then. I took her in the longboat with me, with Chang Lin and three other men. There were two boats besides. The agreement was for each boat to take care of itself, and if one won through, the men were to bring back help. We were to run up coast towards Panama.

"At best we had a long voyage before us, and I decided to leave the gold behind on account of its weight. We had none too much room to spare.

"We spent the first night in the mouth of the river. At dawn, Chang Lin went ashore. He was still ashore when we wanted to sail. I sent one of the men after him. He did not come back. I went myself to look for them. When I came back, I found Nan on the bank and the boat gone. She said Chang Lin and the other man had come back when I was in the jungle. They had put her ashore and gone off in the boat, out to sea. Sure enough, I saw them out a mile or two, with the sail up, making pretty weather of it.

"All I could do was come back to

the schooner and wait. I knew they'd turn up again, some day. If it hadn't been for Nan I'd have tried to get through upcountry; but I knew it was a thousand to one against us, and I didn't like the idea of her in the hands of the dwarfs. So I just waited. Chang Lin would come back some day.

"He was longer about it than I'd expected, and the years slipped by. I kept telling myself he'd come tomorrow. Once, there was another flood, and I cut the sticks out of the old hooker, trying to float her; but she was bedded down, and wouldn't stir. And the stuff grew up around her, until she might have been in the middle of the jungle. That was all I had to show how time was passing. That, and the way Nan grew. Of course, I kept a record of the days and years; but it didn't seem to mean anything. One day was much the same as another.

"After the first year, I sort of settled down. I meant to get out, some day; but there was no hurry. Only lately, when I saw that Nan was a woman, I began to think the time had come to move.

"Then I saw the *Southern Witch,* and knew we'd better lie low a while. Back in the old days when I knew your father, I knew Spanish Joe and the others. I knew the sort of treatment we could expect from them. So we lay low, and I kept a pretty sharp eye open.

"Then you came. We didn't know who you were, because you weren't one of Spanish Joe's gang. Last night, I saw you come aboard. Another man followed you; but I didn't know who he was. Of course, I know now it was Chang Lin. I was within ten feet of you when you killed Finn. And I was within arm's reach of you when you saw Nan. Then you led them away from her, from the schooner. That set us thinking.

"Tonight I was watching this hooker. When I saw them heading for the island, I guessed they'd spotted the *Silver Queen* some way. They sent the nigger on ahead. I followed him and saw you. That made me feel better. I knew you'd account for him, somehow. So I went back and watched the others. I suppose they sent him on to scout around a bit, first, in case you or Chang might be there. That was just like Spanish Joe.

"I saw them take you and Nan, and bring you aboard. I didn't put in my oar then, because it would have been no use. I'd have got one or two; but the others would have got me. So I waited, and when the coast was clear I slipped aboard and came down.

"You know the rest. Chang Lin must have been watching us all, like the yellow snake he was. He came in at the end, to get easy pickings. And that's—all."

Captain Harker sighed wearily, then roused himself with an effort.

"You'll take care of her, Dexter? Give me your word."

"I give you my word," Dexter said, deeply moved.

"Nan. . . ."

She went on her knees with a little broken cry, flung her arms around his neck, kissed him. So he died, while her lips pressed his.

"Come," Dexter said gently. He had for her an infinite compassion, a wonderful pity that her new life should have come to her like this, and at this price.

"Bring him," she said, standing up.

Dexter nodded.

"Yes."

He picked up the old man, made his way on deck, followed by the girl. Three or four of the crew hung about near the rails; but they made no effort to interfere. The big guns in Dexter's belt and his fierce eyes might have been responsible for that.

He took the boat that floated against the schooner's side, rowed her downstream with her sad burden. The moon was sinking when they reached the sloop; the river was touched heavily with shadow.

"We'll bury him at sea," Dexter said. "He would have liked that."

She nodded dumbly.

"And the gold?"

She looked up quickly.

"Does it matter to you?"

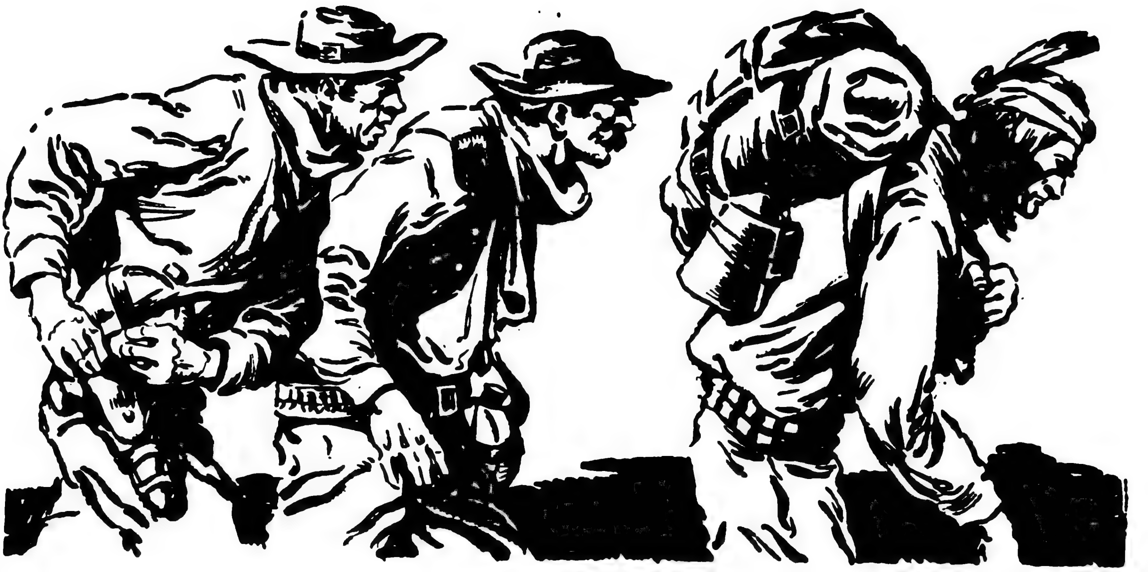
"No. Leave it where it is."

"So many men have died for it. . . We could spend it on others, and wash away the blood . . ." She began to cry, softly, softly.

"Nan!" Dexter said. He was conscious of an overwhelming tenderness, a desire to protect her, to make her happy. "Nan—will you. . . ."

Somehow, she was in his arms, her head on his shoulder.

Next day, they sailed for the yard on Captain's Wharf, for home.



A Brief and Ironic Tale of the Desert

LO, *the* POOR INDIAN

By FREDERICK NIVEN

INDIAN PETE was afoot in the desert, and the way it happened was this:

He had seen them hauling trucks of borax at Akenside. He had heard that this stuff was as much worth while locating as the gold which the prospectors used to go in search of with their little canteen laden burros. And, further, he believed he had seen a whole blanched area of it on one of his lone wanderings away out in that desert euphoniously known as the Sumter Dry Belt. So he had decided to go back there and get a sackful of the stuff and bring it to one of the honest white men he knew who would tell him if it really was this remunerative borax.

On the way out his horse had broken a leg in the lava rocks region, and there was nothing for it but to shoot it. All Indian he was, and conservative in his life. Caught out afoot there he took the old-time Indian way, the way they tell each other of in their legends, the way they still practice at need, the way that Leonard Wood wrote about in his log of that journey he had as a hostage back from Mexico with the surrendered Apaches. Of that way, however, more anon.

Something happened just after Pete had accepted the inevitable and started back afoot. Over a rise of the ochre hills he met two white men, also afoot. And they hailed him with exceeding great joy, hurrying toward him, little packs on their backs, each with his hand on his gun.

The Indian had them fully registered at the first glance. He knew, just knew, who they were. Beyond doubt they were the two men who had held up the bank at Troup. He had heard of that just before setting out to get specimens of that borax—if it was borax. They were desperate men. Cornered in Reynold's Pass they had made a stand-off. Their horses had been shot. They had killed a sheriff and a deputy. After they had ceased fire the others of the posse had been wary about approaching, fearing a ruse to get them to close quarters. That was how they got away; and where they were being looked for—being unhorsed—was in the ranching country south. For what else was there for them to do but snoop around till they could procure—that's to say, steal—

horses to move on? That was obvious as Euclid. That was the argument. And so here they were, still on foot.

"Say, you danged Injun, you know the desert?" one asked without so much as "How-do."

The danged Indian nodded. Pete had been to school, was one of those red men who, as the sociologists and agents say, have reverted. Proud of being Indian he had gone back to bobbed hair and moccasins. He wore a silver bangle; he wore a silver ring with a turquoise set in it.

"You know the lava beds?" the white man inquired.

Pete nodded again.

"Just coming out of them," said he. "Had to shoot my horse there. Broken leg. That's why I'm afoot."

"Oh. And it's a good thing for you that you don't say you don't know that country. All you Injuns do. Now I'm going to tell you something: You are going to guide us into the lava beds to that spring you fellows know about, to fill our canteens. And then you're going to guide us on across it the rest of the way."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Through the lava beds and that way into the desert—and across it—see? People want us over here and we don't want to see them. We got no horses. All right! They think it's a cinch we can't get away across the lava beds and the desert with no horses. So that's the way we're going. Get me?"

Pete nodded again and replied in a slow, pensive voice but with a smoothness and ease that made the white men feel momentarily on the alert somehow, though they did not quite know why.

"I get you," he said.

"All right, then. Right about turn. Luck's with us, meeting you. But just a minute before we start. I'll have your tools."

The Indian looked full in his eyes; but what's to be done in such a contretemps with two men confronting you, each with a hand on his shooting iron? Pete did the only thing that seemed possible. That's to say he did nothing, let them confiscate both his revolver and his hunting knife, and looked as blank as he could to hide his deep rage.

He did not say a thing. He just thought, and hated, as he led the way for these two whites; toyed with the thought that there are more ways than one of death in the desert and that the desert has always been a great ally of the Indian. It was astonishing how he traveled. He was spurred, to begin with, simply by the desire to make them squeal. He would weary them. They would cry for a halt, these two who had urged him so summarily to lead on. When what he hoped for came, it did so in such a way as to fan his hate.

"Here, you Injun," said one of them at last. "Guess you're more accustomed to this than me. You take my pack. We share and share alike, eh?"

Pete stopped and looked stolidly at the speaker, Texas Alf, who was removing his pack. Alf had the persuasion at his belt if the Indian objected, and he dropped a hand to it. So Pete, with a face exceedingly blank, but in the core of his eyes a fire, did as he was told. Then they held on again. Only the labored breathing of both behind him helped Pete slightly, slightly mollified him. He swung on, far beyond the last grass, in certain steps from rock to polished curve of lava.

"Say, when do we come to water?" asked Hank, the other man.

Pete did not reply, deep in rehearsals of vengeance, schemes to turn the tables on these men.

"I spoke to you, you Injun. When do we come to this water?" asked Hank again.

"If we go at this rate we get there by sundown."

"By sundown!"

"Yes."

"Sure to be there? Does it ever give out?"

"No, never."

"Then we'll have a snort from the canteens."

But Alf wanted more certainty.

"Sure it never fails?" he asked.

"No. Water always there."

So they both drank. But their guide did not. They did not offer him a drink and he did not ask for one. At any rate, he did not believe in drinking till the day was done. Away on in the late afternoon, when the saffron and rose tints began to drift and blend where had only been quaking heat haze, he effected a compromise, put a pebble under his tongue and sucked on that.

"What's that moving over there?" asked Hank, suddenly stopping.

The Indian had seen it for a long while.

"Where my horse is," he explained. "Buzzards found him."

And then the movement was obvious, ever and again a ragged winged bird rising, to settle again as they squabbled over that carcass.

SURE enough, before sundown Pete showed them water, led them into a little basin where was even grass, where even were mesquite bushes round a spring that made no creek, that just bubbled up, air beads winking and bursting over it, and trickled away, lost in interstices of strange, scrawled, glistening rock. He had brought them here, but they did not trust him. And they were in no wise diffident in their expression of that distrust.

"Well," said Alf, "we can spin a coin, Hank, for who takes first watch in case this here ornery Injun tries to beat it in the night."

They were entirely frank with him regarding the penalty if he did try to beat it. They informed him, without heat, calmly and definitely, that he would not go more than ten feet, and then make coyote meat. And did he get them?

"I get you, all right," he said.

He was going to show them how to make a small cooking fire out of the scant brush there, but they'd have none of that.

"No. No smoke; no fire," they said. "We got some cold grub here."

That they offered, prohibiting a fire, to share their cooked food with him did not in the slightest soften him in his view of them. A man must eat to live—and they needed him. That was all. Hank dotted the "i's" and crossed the "t's" of that belief by remarking:

"We got to keep you alive so you can act guide tomorrow, see?"

Pete had seen and made no comment. He dropped his eyelids that they might not read his thoughts. They noted the immobility of his face and glanced to one another and laughed. They thought: "This fellow would slit our throats if he got half a chance." An easy assumption. He would, too. That was just how he felt.

However, he had a bulge on them. They needed him. He did not need them. He rolled a cigaret, the one evening cigaret he allowed himself, and then made a cocoon of himself in his blanket in a hollow of sand and, drawing his blanket over his ears, fell asleep. Away on in the night Hank woke Alf to watch carefully, lest they were pursued, and to watch, also, or even more carefully, lest Pete slither away. He heard the change of guard and sneered to himself in his blanket, awakened by it, then slept again, taking the sop that offered—the consolation that they had but half his share of slumber.

Still, if they used him he would use them. That was his waking thought. He would have their opinion of that white stuff he had seen in the desert. He led them down out of the slope and jumble of the lava tangle to where it glittered.

"Borax," said he casually, his first conversational remark.

They raised their heads and roared with laughter. His ignorance amused them. But Texas Alf told him, jocundly, that this danged stuff had fooled white men as well as Injun. And he launched into a story to his partner about a "half-baked, nutty old guy" who, when the borax discoveries were made, recalled how, when looking for gold, he had seen acres of it—whole acres of it, he said—and led two excited financiers out to view it. "And they were so goldarned mad," he ended, "that they blew the head off the old galoot right there and planted him till judgment day in his borax. Borax! Oh, yes, the white man has been fooled on this too, all same 'Lo, the poor Indian!' "

Pete did not seem, by his expression, to have got more than the gist of all that. But he had; and he accentuated, brooding on, the tacit realization that if a white man could be fooled, any danged Injun would be. Anyhow, he had the question settled. He had used these two men who were using him. That white stuff was not borax. He moved on, and after a while Hank, halting to look back, had a question.

"What in hell did you take that twist for coming out of the lava hills?"

"What twist?"

"Why, look how you're heading now. You could have come a shorter way out of them lava beds. Say, are you trying to lead us back and forth, and round about, or what?"

"I only wanted to know if that was borax," explained Pete, and looked with level gaze in Hank's eyes.

"You did? Well, that's not what you're here for. Did you think we'd want to stop and stake it?"

"No. I thought I might—afterwards."

"After what?"

"After you get through."

"Oh. Well, you don't take any more twists aside for us to geologize for you. Just you remember what you're here for. You ain't taking a couple of essay engineers around. You got two badmen in tow and any more circumbends and they blow your head off——"

"And what then?" asked Pete. "Think you could get across the desert yourselves?"

Alf thrust his face forward to within an inch of the Indian's.

"Don't get fresh," said he, "or we might see if we could make it without you."

THE desert here was no billiard table of sand. It was a land that deranged the retina by what can best be called its orderly chaos. Pockmarked with hollows, dotted with little eminences, it stretched before them, the bumps and hollows so regular as to be fantastic. It suggested something beyond a maze. It suggested confused vision. Indeed, it did definitely confuse the mind. A landscape gardener, or generations of them, might have laid it out, so orderly was it—demented landscape gardeners making landscape but no garden.

It told on the white men; the Indian watched it tell. He marked their unrestraint. He watched them drink frequently from their canteens, and offered no advice. He heard them curse the heat and the sand and all, as they trudged, wasting breath. The desert does not say anything. It just waits.

He had warned them, he had told them, earlier, leaving the lava beds, that the next waterhole might be dry. And it was dry. One would have thought he was the keeper of springs then by their rage. The desert, as the high country, tests a man, shows what he is. They talked. They raved. They addressed the unutterable scene. They declaimed to the dry hole in torrents of abuse, and a little sneer flickered by the Indian's nostrils.

"What now?" they asked. The burden was on him.

"I told you," he said. "You should have saved that water in your canteens. We better rest here now, even without water, and make the next spring by night. It will be cooler."

He was rigging up his blanket to a lone candlewood bush to make a piece of shade.

"Well, it's a cinch, anyhow," broke out Alf, "nobody who knows this section will ever think we came this way. We were wise in our direction. There's no one looking for us west. If we had only run on a burro to pack a whole jag of canteens! If we had horses! But they know we was afoot. It's a cinch they'd think we'd never try to get out and away this way."

Hank lifted the canteen that still held a little water.

"You're off it, you Injun," he said. "Guess you aborigines have long training in how to get along without water." And tilting the canteen to his lips he drank eagerly.

"Here, cut that out!" exclaimed Alf. "Get that canteen from your head. Go fifty-fifty, dang you."

They squabbled. They turned on each other with fierce profanity. Pete gazed into distance and rolled a cigaret. It was a moment for an extra one beyond his desert allowance. It was his action that suddenly stopped them. There was an air of quiet triumph about his movements. It seemed that the aspect of waiting that the desert wore had passed to the Indian—he and it with an old understanding.

"Here, damn you," blazed Hank, "how do you make out, how do you get along without any water at all, anyhow?"

"No water—go without," said Pete.

It sounded a savage philosophy, but it puzzled them.

THEY were puzzled more when their tongues were dry as leather, when their temples throbbed and the Indian remained as ever, expressionless. They hated him for his serenity. He coiled up in a hole in the sand with his back to them and, it seemed, fell asleep at once. Near by, the white men dozed and swore and dozed again. When dusk came, and the stars, the Indian rose to lead them on. And with the first glory of dawn he pointed out to them an amethyst ridge on the southwestern horizon, and told them that was where they wanted to go.

"This side one little waterhole. I know where. Other side," said he, "grass. Heap water, river. Other side, forest, grouse, deer."

"How long get there?" asked Alf.

"Two days on foot," replied Pete, "or two nights better. Don't look at the mountains when we walk. If you look you get more tired."

There was intense wisdom in the warning. If one did not look ahead for an hour or two, the distant peaks, when then glanced at, did seem to have come a little —a very little—nearer. But if a man focused his gaze on them and kept staring at them as he trudged on to reach them, it was as if he only marked time in a gravel pit. In fact, it seemed at moments, due to the very intensity of longing to bring that blue smear nearer, that it receded instead. That way madness lies. But they did not take his advice, and suddenly without warning the man Hank began to rave. He wheeled on his partner and blamed him.

"It was you suggested this way," said he.

"Well, what about it?"

"I can't do it!" he yelled. "Look at that range. It don't get no nearer. I got to have a drink. I don't know how that danged Injun makes out with no water at all! I got to get it, I got to. By God, I got to have a drink! It was your notion to get out this way. Get me a drink somewheres, Alf, or I shoot your head off!" His hand dropped to his gun.

He never pulled it. Alf was too quick. His hand went down and up. He shot, and Hank fell, hit full in the forehead. Six-gun in hand, Alf turned and looked at the sole witness.

"He go mad. No water," he explained.

"Sure," replied the philosophic red man, and his face registered nothing. Nor did he evince any interest when Alf explored his dead partner's pack and educed therefrom a very hefty wad of bills. Hadn't he known, just known, who these men were?

"Well, we'll go on now to this water," said Alf.

BEFORE, the Indian had taken the lead. It would appear now that the desert, in its great loneliness, impressed the heart of this white man. Unaware of what he did, he at once walked level with the Indian, for human solace. Yet as he trudged he was plotting. At the desert's end he knew what he'd do. This Indian would never go back to tell anything. One bark of a gun and that would be over. It was all very fortunate. Sixty thousand bucks—a good fortune for one. Better than thirty thousand. Bet your life!

He turned and glanced at his guide and so doing, met his eyes. Pete was trudging along, observing him. At the meeting of their gaze he had the feeling that the Indian had read his thought. He might as well have spoken it aloud. Then, eyes forward, they trudged on again, trailing a pennant of dust at heel.

How in hell could this Injun get along without water? Centuries of training, maybe. For himself, Alf could at any moment have tossed down his roll and yelled—yelled for the burning sky to fall on them and finish it all. His feet were like fire. In his thighs, steel poniards jabbed at every step. His throat was dry as tinder. His tongue felt like a sliver of brittle wood in his mouth. He would try sucking a pebble, as Pete did. He bent to pick up one, stumbled, recovered, pebble in hand, put it between his dry lips. But this makeshift for water maddened him.

"By God, I've got to have a drink," he whimpered. Whimpered, this man who had held up the bank at Troup, who had held off the posse, who, where men were concerned, had little fear; or, if fear, the hard courage to throttle it. The arid desert made him whimper, whimper.

Pete admonished him.

"You better keep cool. Maybe no water at this hole. If no water we just got to go on."

And there was no water at the hole.

Then Pete saw what one member of the conquering race could do. Down in that hole, dropping his pack, Alf groveled on his knees and scooped like a dog. No water. He rose and, throwing up his arms, he shook his fists at the heedless arc of space over them. He looked round the wild expanse. And he saw, south, what the Indian saw; but he did not know, as

Pete knew, that it was not water. Even his vision had become deranged by fatigue and thirst.

Crazy, forgetting or ignoring his pack, he set off in a lurching run. And the Indian let him go. Often in the old history of these parts has the desert been the Indian's ally.

Pete stood watching him for a long time. His eyesight was good and he could follow the dwindling figure. Here and there, in a dip, he lost it, then found it again. It lurched on toward nothing, toward mirage. It stopped again. It was taking off its vest, its shirt. Well, Pete had helped to hunt for lost men in the desert and they were always found the same way, with their clothes off. The figure ran on. He was mad with thirst, that man.

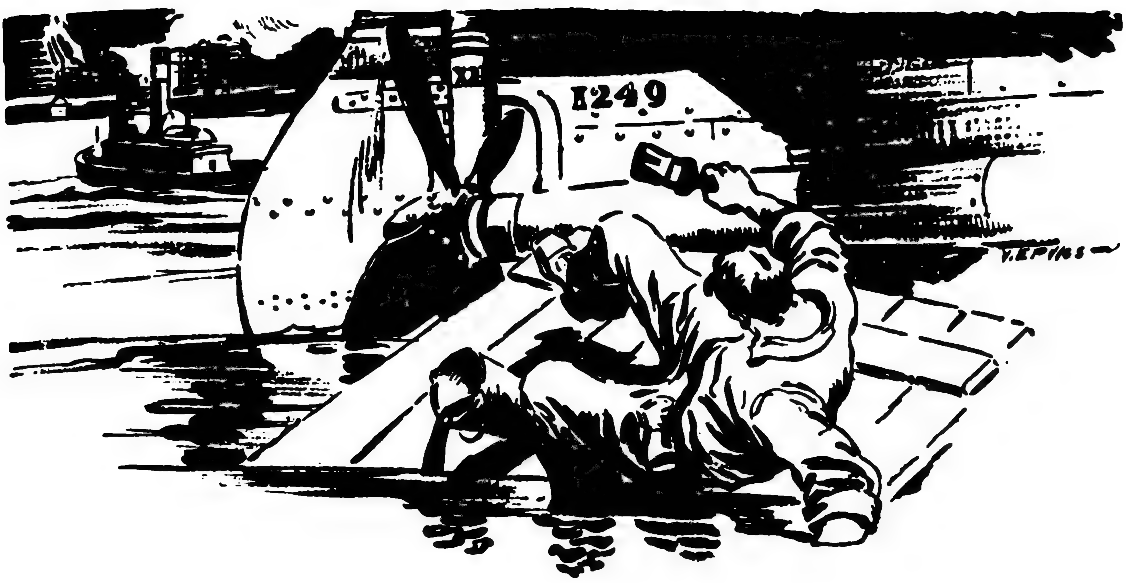
The Indian, too, was thirsty. There had been no opportunity for him to drink for a long time, Alf walking level with him, Alf, when they rested, staying too close. But now he opened his shirt and with no subterfuge drew forth the end of what seemed to be a sausage skin. It was precisely that.

When he had shot his horse he had removed lengths of intestine, swilled them out clean, old Indian fashion, then filled them with water at the spring in the lava beds and wound that tubular reservoir round his waist under his shirt. Tepid water, but water. Leonard Wood, coming across other deserts as a hostage with the Apaches, noted the old practice in his record of that trip. The Indians still, on occasion, at need, fall back upon it. But they don't talk of it. The conquering race uses canteens. So be it. Who is an Indian to give advice to the masterful white intruder?

Pete undid the knot at the end, drank, heaved a sigh, then made a knot again. He took up the white man's pack and started back at the same even speed as before. A day or two of fasting was neither here nor there—if one had water. In fact one went easier, or at least for a day or two. On the way back he could decide whether to keep this money—a pleasant windfall, especially seeing that the white stuff over there wasn't lucrative borax after all—or go to Troup and tell his story. They would, doubtless, give him a reward. That was, for the moment, neither here nor there.

He paused and looked back over the desert. Nothing. The man had dissolved in the haze of space. The desert was empty of all save the quiver of heat. Overhead a buzzard with ragged edged wings flapped in search of food and poised and examined a fallen man by the edge of a lake that was only a lake of mirage.

Indian Pete trudged on, upon the back track. There was an occasional gurgling sound as he walked. He had not tied the new knot sufficiently far along the thin reservoir around him. But that did not matter now that he was alone, with none to hear the telltale gurgle and so have suspicion roused as to how the danged, ornery Indian made out.



An Amusing Tale of the Toilers of the Sea in Port

SADMUSH

By MILLARD WARD

THE Palermo Lunch Room, just across the road from a broad concrete pier on the waterfront of Staten Island, had passed through the morning rush of workmen and was quiet, still crisp with the lingering aroma of breakfast.

Olivia, dark haired, clear skinned and young, heiress to the proprietor, Signor Rinelli, moved leisurely from table to table with a light cloth, brushing crumbs off on the floor. She moved leisurely because two men were still seated at a side table, smoking, and it was possible they might want something more.

Through the front windows, gold and dusty with October sunlight, she could see the black, towering bows of an ocean freighter, hawsers leading steeply down to bollards on the pier, the name, *Harcuvar,* sharp across her plates.

From the appearance and manner of her customers, Olivia judged that they were petty officers seeking a change from the *Harcuvar's* brand of eggs. One was tall and broad, with blue shirt and dungarees and a mop of tousled yellow hair. A broken down uniform cap with a black chin strap lay on the table before him. Probably, thought Olivia, bos'n. The other was a small, plaintive looking man with swarthy skin and hands ingrained with black. Engine room man, maybe oiler. Olivia was familiar with all the usual ratings aboard merchant ships.

These two had been watching her with undisguised pleasure ever since they came in. There was nothing apparent about either of them to arouse answering passion, but it promised to be a dull morning, so the next time she passed their table she dropped her duster.

The two men reached it at the same instant, but it was the bos'n who returned the cloth.

She smiled softly.

"Thank you so-o-o much."

The bos'n writhed slightly and blushed.

"It iss yust notting to do for you."

Olivia sat on the edge of the table, swinging one foot. Her slippers were neat and her stockings heavy black silk.

"You boys off that ship there?" A slim eyebrow indicated the *Harcuvar.*

The bos'n nodded confidentially.

"Yah, I am bos'n."

At the same time the smaller man succeeded in maneuvering clear of the bos'n's back.

"Me, I am deck engineer. You spik Italian?"

Olivia waved her eyelashes and ignored the bos'n's icy stare.

"No, I was born here and my father never taught me. I finished high school last June. I've got to work this year but maybe next year I can go to college."

The seamen beamed competitive admiration.

"Dot's good. Dot's fine. You learn plenty, I guess." The bos'n beamed.

"I betta da teach' like you best, eh?" the deck engineer put in.

"Hey, shut oop vunce!" the bos'n said.

The engineer glared, and the bos'n swallowed hard.

Olivia slid down from the table and retired behind the counter. The bos'n and deck engineer had risen and were facing each other, sputtering.

The door opened suddenly and a sturdy young man in a blue serge uniform came in. His cheeks were pink and fresh looking and he wore a crisp, sandy mustache, but it was the three rings of gold on his sleeves that brought an abrupt end to the uproar.

His eyes fixed keenly on the bos'n, who regarded his Number Eleven shoes.

"Quarter past eight, bos'n. I've been looking all over for you. Get back on board in a hurry and turn the men to on those winches."

The deck engineer followed the bos'n unobtrusively, and as they started across the road they heard Olivia's voice behind them, soft and ecstatic.

"Ooooh, Mr. Williams, how nice you look! I wish I was first mate so I could wear so pretty a uniform."

THE deck engineer, Vittorio Casa, and the bos'n, Oscar Scram, like the rest of the unlicensed personnel of the *Harcuvar,* were new on board. The ship had been held at anchor for several weeks at the end of the last voyage and the old crew had been paid off to cut expenses. Now, she was almost ready to begin loading for the next trip across.

Neither Vittorio nor Oscar spoke on their way back until they were ready to part at the head of the gangway.

Then Vittorio said gloomily:

"You spoil-a everything. Da mate come after you. You breeng bad-a luck."

"Ahhh," the bos'n snarled, "you all de time got a sad mush. Always you holler about someting."

The deck engineer started for the port alleyway.

"Dat's a right. I tak tonight someone to da movies. I don' ask-a you!"

The bos'n glared after him.

"Nobody go wit you, Sadmush. I tak somevun mebby myself."

The steam winches for handling cargo had rusted during the *Harcuvar's* weeks at anchor and now the sailors' work was to cover the idle ones on the after deck with a mixture of fish oil and black paint.

The deck engineer started a job of repairing on a troublesome winch at the foot of the mainmast, but the first assistant called him away on some odd job about nine o'clock and he left it half taken apart with his tools lying scattered around.

Later, when one of the able seamen came to this place with his can of slush, he reflected a while, hitched up his dungarees and went in search of the bos'n.

"Th' decky's workin' on one o' them winches," he reported. "He ain't there now but his tools is. Do I skip it an' go on to the next?"

The bos'n's small blue eyes lighted an instant before he put on his official scowl.

"Mate say paint all de after vinches, not some of 'em. Yo' go on an' paint dat vinch. Ve can't vait for no decky on dis ship."

When Vittorio returned, he found the winch, all its loose parts and a few of his tools thickly coated with the mixture of paint and oil.

His hands were fervent on the shoulders of the seaman, who had moved on to the next job.

"Wassa matta you? You a craze? Don' you see somebody work dere? How I work now?"

The sailor wriggled free.

"Hey, don't tell me yer troubles. I told the bos'n somebody was workin' there an' he says go on anyhow. I ain't got nothin' to do wit it."

The deck engineer's face was darker than ever as he stood looking down at the mess, but he took off his jumper and picked up the slippery tools without saying anything more.

Later, when the winch was assembled again and he was going toward his quarters, black smeared from forehead to waist, lugging his heavy box of tools, he met the bos'n near the galley door.

Oscar grinned broadly.

"You tak somevun to de movies all black like dat, Sadmush?"

The sound Vittorio made was like a cat spitting, but he found no words to answer. The bos'n went away whistling.

Late that afternoon as the chief mate was walking on the pier alongside, his critical eye discovered that the vertical row of draft numbers on the *Harcuvar's* stern post was badly painted and in some places almost illegible. He, in turn, sought out the bos'n.

"Get the raft over the side, bose," he said, "and touch up the draft numbers on the stern post. Whoever painted 'em before must have been full of Johnny Walker."

"Yes, sir," agreed the bos'n. "I get Charley to do it."

The mate hesitated and frowned.

"No, I'd rather you'd do it yourself, bose. It won't take long and I don't want it botched again."

The bos'n nodded importantly and went aft to unlash from the taffrail the small cask and plank raft which the carpenter had knocked together for just such a job.

Half an hour later the deck engineer, down on the pier on another errand for the first assistant, caught sight of the bos'n at his solitary work. The little raft, held in place by heaving lines forward and aft, was floating against the stern post, one ten foot bronze blade of the propeller towering over the raft and a second blade extending out through the water a foot or two beneath it.

Vittorio stood quite still and watched.

The bos'n, feeling eyes upon him, glanced up and flourished a paint brush in bravado.

"Ay, Sadmush. You got anodder vinch to fix yet, Sadmush?"

The little man turned abruptly, swung back up the gangway and went down to the engine room, his face as resentful as ever but his dark eyes dancing. The huge steel pistons and cylinders below, glossy and warm and quiet, were like Percheron geldings in a stable—powerful but docile. The hum of the dynamo and the light clanking of an auxiliary pump were drowsy rather than disturbing. There had been no important work left over from the last trip and no one was below except a young oiler intent upon a coverless magazine.

Vittorio wiped his hands deliberately on a piece of waste and offered the oiler a cigaret.

"Everyting in good shape, eh?"

"Uh-huh," said the oiler.

Vittorio nodded approvingly.

"Dat's a good. You know we move tonight to nudder berth."

"No, thought we was to load here. Move tonight, huh?"

"Yes, I tink about ten o'clock. You jack da engine over yet?"

The oiler looked interested.

"No. Should I do that, deck?"

Vittorio shrugged elaborately.

"I always did it in other sheeps, when I was oiler. A few hours before she move. Jus' to mak sure everyting work all right. But you mus' be ver' easy."

The oiler's magazine went down on the tool bench.

"Well, it won't hoit nothin' to toin her over easy."

Vittorio sidled inconspicuously around to the ladder and in thirty seconds was back on the pier alongside the ship.

The bos'n, squatting now on the rough planks of the raft, was working absorbedly on the white numbers just above the water. Vittorio, well in the shadow of the warehouse on the pier, fixed his eyes on the wavery outline of the propeller blade beneath the raft and watched it, fascinated.

Almost imperceptibly it began to move. The bos'n looked up, open mouthed, at the first slight jar. Then, with ponderous dignity, the raft lifted, parted its mooring line like a cotton thread, and as the bos'n's look of surprise changed to incredulous horror, slipped off the rising propeller blade and tossed its passenger overboard. By the time the bos'n had come up, rubbed the water out of his eyes and caught hold of the gently rocking raft, the propeller had completed one leisurely revolution and stopped again. The bos'n regarded the motionless blades with a pained expression, and heaved himself carefully back aboard the raft.

His paint pot had taken the brushes

with it to the bottom of the dock, so he pulled the raft alongside by its unbroken stern line and started wrathfully up the Jacob's ladder to the deck.

Vittorio ran forward through the warehouse and was up the gangway and back in the engine room well ahead of the bos'n.

The oiler had picked up his magazine again, but he raised his eyes when the deck engineer's feet clattered on the ladder.

"She toined over, all right, deck."

Vittorio caught his arm hurriedly.

"Da bos'n was paintin' on da raft back dere an' da wheel trow heem overboard. No hurt but plenty mad. Eef he come here you let me talk, eh?"

The next moment heavier feet thumped on the long steel ladder overhead.

The bos'n saw, as he reached the lowest steps, that no licensed engineer was below. His roar was sudden and echoing.

"Vat dom fool turn over dat engine? You vant to kill somebody?"

He stood dripping on the floorplates, overalls clinging to his muscle ridged body, and his face crimson.

Vittorio looked at him curiously.

"Wat dam fool turn over wat engine, bos'n?" he inquired in a soothing voice. "How you get so wet?"

The bos'n choked and rumbled:

"You know dom vell vat enchine. I break you neck you lie to me."

"Nobody turn over engine while I am here, bose. I swear it. Did you see da weel turn?"

"I don' see it turn ven I am unter vater, fool," the bos'n rumbled uneasily. "But I feel it coom oop."

Vittorio's face lightened.

"Oh, maybe it was a porpoise, den, bos'n, or a whale. I tink at first you-a craze' an' I feel bad fo' you."

The bos'n glared from the deck engineer to the blank faced oiler and then at the floorplates uncertainly.

"Vell, my paint pot iss gone."

Nobody replied and after a minute he hauled himself back up the ladder.

As he was crossing an upper grating, Vittorio's soft voice floated up to him.

"Aiii, bos'n. You tak someone to da movies all wet like you are?"

The bos'n went on doggedly climbing.

On the pier he found the chief mate looking at the deserted raft.

"Why didn't you get that lowest number, bose?" the officer inquired when he saw the bos'n returning without the paint pot.

Oscar studied his oozing shoes.

"Someting come along an' upset de raft," he mumbled. "Efferyting go overboard."

The mate looked startled, then grinned.

"You are a little damp. What kind of thing was it?"

"I don' know. I vas unter vater. I tink first de veel turn over und spill me, but de engine room say I crazy an' it mus' be porpoise or vale."

"Hum," said the mate drily. "I was just talking to the chief engineer and he didn't give any orders to turn her over. Anybody see it happen?"

"No, sir. All de longshoremen vork forward an' nobody see it."

The mate's eyes shifted from the exposed propeller blades, already dried by the autumn sunshine, over the tranquil, unbroken surface of the dock, and then twinkled suddenly.

"Well, bose," he said as he turned away, "you've been at sea long enough to have a right to fall overboard and lose a paint pot if you want to without blaming it on a whale."

The bos'n stared after him helplessly, big hands opening and shutting and mouth wide open. Even yet, when he moved over to haul in the useless raft, he left a small pool of water where he had been standing.

AT FIVE o'clock the small gang of longshoremen, who were still working the Number One hold, knocked off for an hour and the *Harcuvar* lay quiet in the dusk, her port-holes yellow and friendly with light.

Through supper the bos'n sulked, and afterward he wandered morosely about the deck alone. He felt keenly the indignity of having fallen overboard and was sore and mystified about it. At the foot of the foremast he paused and stared down into the open hold. Only a couple of hours' work remained for the stevedores. Some loose nails and a piece of a broken hatch batten lay on a covered steam pipe at his feet and he gathered them up idly, shaking them about in his hand. Without being able to prove anything, he connected the deck engineer very definitely with his accident, and as he thought of Vittorio his small eyes became still smaller.

When the bos'n turned away, he cracked his ankle bone smartly against one of the valves of the port winch. The fact that the winch was one of Vittorio's special pets heightened his wrath, and with a vicious back sweep of his arm he sent a handful of junk clattering under its guards. Then, muttering to himself, he went aft toward his quarters to dress for the projected trip to the movies.

Near the head of the gangway he met a group of stevedores returning to work, and a few minutes later he heard the forward winches chugging again. In the port alleyway he passed the door of the deck engineer's room, lighted but covered by a heavy green curtain. Further along, in the petty officers' mess, he saw that a pinochle game was in progress.

"Hey, bose," someone called. "Tell us about that whale you seen this afternoon."

The bos'n stopped in his tracks. So the story was about at last. Then he saw red. His first plunge carried him through the door and up to the edge of the mess table.

"I ain't seen no vale," he shouted. "Somebody done me a dirty trick. Somebody in dis ship done it."

He was pounding the table with his fist, blows that bounced and echoed.

"I don' care who done it, I say de man dat spill me overboard and iss scared to say so iss no man. He iss a doity, yellow coward an' if I find him I break him in half with vun han'."

The card players leaned back in their seats, grinning appreciatively, then another voice ripped down the alleyway in a shrill yelp of anger.

"Aiii, yo' beeg squarehead. You talk-a, talk-a, talk-a. You don' do notting. I speel you. I! I, Vittorio Casa! I speel you. You put you head out dat messroom, I keel you, too."

The bos'n swung about ponderously and stared at the door. Then the blood rushed into his face and he charged forward, bellowing.

As his head appeared in the alleyway, the curtain of Vittorio's room drew back and a short Stillson wrench passed close before the bos'n's nose, putting a dent an inch deep in a ventilator shaft further down the alleyway.

"Ooo!" said the bos'n and ducked back.

The wooden wall rack for the petty officers' dishes was at his elbow and in a moment he had an armful of quarter inch thick, china dinner plates. The card players, anticipating ricochets and stray shots, retired unanimously under the table, from where they shouted advice and encouragement. The wily bos'n dropped to his knees and looked out just above the raised doorsill, a plate poised in his right hand. Vittorio was wild with an eight inch cold chisel and the bos'n's reply ruffled his hair.

For the next minute the bos'n hurled dishes like clay pigeons from a trap, but when he turned back for a fresh supply, the fire superiority passed to the enemy. A flat wrench went by the door with a crisp *tweet!* as Oscar's yellow hair showed, and an instant later a hose spanner took a soup bowl cleanly out of his hand, leaving him blinking at a narrow, curved fragment still between his fingers.

The gunnery on both sides grew faster, the yells more bloodcurdling.

Vittorio was left handed, which enabled him to fire with as little exposure as his opponent, and in all the uproar of shouts, squeals, banging metal and crashing china, neither was damaging the other. Near the forward end of the alleyway the chief engineer's door opened suddenly and a protesting head appeared. At the same time a small platter, dipping and skimming like a swallow, reduced itself to powder against the bulkhead a foot or so away, and the head snapped back as if on a rubber band. In a momentary lull there was a sound not only of a closing door but of a key turning hastily in a lock.

Shortage of ammunition struck Vittorio first. In even a deck engineer's tool box there are only just so many tools and retrieving any was flatly out of the question. The bos'n had scarcely begun on the dessert dishes and still had the tea cups in reserve when Vittorio's frantically groping hand met bare, greasy wood.

One final burst of nuts, bolts and the few odds and ends remaining forced the bos'n back momentarily, then Vittorio broke cover and was off up the alleyway.

The bos'n was heavy but his legs were long and he almost retrieved his bad start before they reached the deck amidships. There Vittorio turned sharply, scampered across the bunker hatch and went up the starboard ladder to the boat deck like a monkey. Lifeboats, ventilators and skylights could be dodged or vaulted but at the after rail he lost ground when he took time to scramble through before dropping to the deck below. The bos'n leaped clear over, coming down in a pan of potatoes the cook had left outside the galley, but almost hooking his fingers in Vittorio's shirt. Again they went through the alleyway, this time with scarcely a yard between them, and at the forward end Vittorio kept on toward the gangway.

Mr. Williams had been roused from a gentle after-supper nap by the riot and came out of the saloon passage in time to have Vittorio go fairly between his legs. The surprise more than anything else caused him to sit down on the deck abruptly and the bos'n, unable to stop or turn, leaped clear over him, one skimming foot rolling a cap with a gold chin strap halfway across the deck. Then, while the mate was catching his breath and trying to think of something adequate to say, the two were gone with a clattering dive down the gangway.

ON THE pier Vittorio felt his chances waning. Behind him the bos'n did not sound at all tired and a little way ahead, abreast Number One hatch, was a barrier of boxes and crates just lowered down by the long derricks on the forward deck. A thin wire cable with a large hook shackled onto the end dangled from the port derrick, swung well out over the pier, and when Vittorio was within a dozen feet a winch began to rumble busily, hauling the naked hook up for another load. Vittorio's leap was desperate but accurate. One hand closed over the hook and the little man shot skyward out of the bos'n's very arms. Looking down, Vittorio met Oscar's astounded glare, and, placing his left thumb at his nose, he twinkled his fingers.

"Yahhhh!" said Vittorio from a height of thirty feet.

At the same time one of the nails the bos'n had thrown at the port winch was jarred loose from the guard and fell neatly into the gears. The winch coughed and stopped so suddenly that Vittorio's body danced like a jumping jack.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Wassa matta you? Lower down on da deck. Queek."

The winch, however, was through for the day and refused to run either forward or back. Thirty feet above the concrete pier, Vittorio found that his hands, slippery with grease from his tools, were losing their hold on the smooth, steel hook.

"Ai!" he squealed. "I sleep. Lower down queek. You-a craze?"

The longshoremen and half the crew of the *Harcuvar* stood and gaped helplessly while the winch driver worked at the jammed gears. Vittorio's body was scarcely visible in the high dimness and his yell was followed by grim silence.

On the pier below, the bos'n turned and dashed back toward the gangway. He came out on the forward deck, scattering men to left and right.

"Swing de boom," he roared. "Swing de boom."

Sailors and longshoremen stared uncomprehendingly and the bos'n himself charged at one of the long tackles guying the port boom.

While he struggled with the stiff pin in the shackle that held the lower block to the deck, he shouted again:

"Slack away dat after guy."

This time someone understood and the guy sagged loosely. The bos'n went plowing across the deck, his body bent forward beneath the weight of the forward guy, the line skirling through the block on his shoulder. At an eyebolt near the starboard rail he stopped, there was a sharp clink of a shackle pin; then the bos'n threw his weight on the hauling part of the tackle. A half dozen men sprang to help him, and the shadowy column of the derrick moved forward ponderously with Vittorio dangling at the upper end like a reeled-in fish. The derrick was swinging in a slow arc across the deck. The men on the tackle heaved together with a short, rising "yo-ho" and the derrick passed over the center of the hatch. Its own weight was with it now and it crossed under the other boom with a rush, slapping the heavy wires aside like cobwebs. Then just as the end cleared the starboard rail, Vittorio's half paralyzed hands failed and he hurtled out and down. The swinging derrick threw him as if from a sling and the spray of his fall flashed out of the black water of the dock fifty feet from the *Harcuvar's* side.

The bos'n dropped the hauling part of the tackle with a grunt and leaned over the rail, watching.

When Vittorio's head appeared above the surface he grinned maliciously, but the next moment his body tautened and the grin was wiped away. Vittorio's head had gone under again.

"Tam!" said the bos'n and crawled through the rail.

A faint, choking cry came from the darkness, and he plunged overboard heavily. His swimming was noisy and left a broad wake of foam for fifty feet, then he stopped and began treading water. His head went down suddenly and the men at the rail of the *Harcuvar* could see the throw of his thick legs. For an interval the surface was unbroken except by drifting bubbles. Two sailors came running aft from the forepeak carrying a Jacob's ladder and heaving line, and the others fell back to let them come to the rail.

Then, quietly, two heads were above water in the middle of the dock. A seaman stood at the rail with the heaving line clear in his hand. It shot out with a hard, overhand snap and spray spatted a yard beyond the bos'n's head. The trailing line tautened.

"I got her. Heave avay." It was a muffled howl.

A dozen hands were on the line, the Jacob's ladder clattered downward and the bos'n came alongside, coasting.. He climbed up to the rail methodically, with Vittorio hanging limp over one shoulder, scrambled over and strode aft to the clear deck amidships. There he hung Vittorio carelessly over the edge of the bunker hatch and stepping back, began to squeeze the water out of his clothes with his hands.

After draining busily for a minute or two the deck engineer gasped and opened his eyes. The bos'n promptly began rolling up the clinging right sleeve of his shirt.

"Whatsa idea o' that, bose?" someone asked.

"Just as soon as dis faller can stand up," replied Oscar definitely, "I am goin' to punch his nose. Den I go ashore an' tak somevun to de movies."

Vittorio struggled to his feet, and stood, swaying back and forth, his head on a level with the bos'n's breast.

"Aiii, you beeg squarehead!" he gasped. "You talk-a, talk-a. I am de one tak someone to de movies. You say a word I poosh da fess."

Oscar stared for a slow, unbending moment, then his grin matched the light in his small blue eyes.

"Py golly, Vic!" he roared. "Ve vill both tak somevun to de movies."

A HALF hour later, in going-ashore clothes, the huge bos'n and small, solemn deck engineer hurried along the pier toward the Palermo Lunch Room. Its lighted windows shone brightly before them and Vittorio's legs twinkled to keep up with the bos'n's huge strides.

"I hope she ees still dere."

"Py golly, I hope so, too."

At the end of the pier they swung eagerly off into the dusty road. They had almost come to the golden windows when the door opened and Olivia stood silhouetted against the light. There was no mistaking the neat, straight figure and sweet face beneath the close little hat. The seamen drew delighted breaths and snatched off their cloth caps.

Then, as Olivia came lightly down the steps, they sagged together helplessly.

A broad shouldered young man in tweed top coat and soft hat was coming down the steps with her, pleasant and alert, the light still on his face. It was the chief officer of the *Harcuvar*.

Olivia's eyes swept over the two crumpled figures with no sign of recognition as she passed, and Mr. Williams was looking down with so much interest at the loose hair over her ear that he did not see them at all.

A door clicked in a taxicab that had been waiting inconspicuously near by, the engine started and the two seamen were left standing alone in a faint, subsiding cloud of dust.

After a while the bos'n replaced his cap and sighed deeply.

"You vant to go to de movies now, Vic?"

The deck engineer mutely shook his head.

"Vell, den, ve go back on board. In my room I got yet two bottle beer I got from de steward of dat Yerman ship in de next slip."

Vittorio's white teeth flashed through the darkness in a rare, engaging smile.

"On de way we stop in my room. I got cigars. No chip cigars. Ten-a cent."

Concluding

The CIRCUS FLYERS

By THOMSON BURTIS

Preceding Events Briefly Retold

The Gavin-Garfield Circus was facing ruin. Some mysterious force, operating in the dark, and for unknown reasons, was doing its best to cripple the great show. An unprecedented number of accidents were happening. Animals died, equipment went bad, performers were injured. And the show was getting a bad reputation in the towns along its route. In some, even, it was not permitted to set up its big top. All of which presaged financial disaster. And to solve this mystery, and incidentally to earn money to develop a promising oil field which they owned, came George Groody and Tom Service.

They were no amateurs, either at sleuthing or the show business. Groody was an ex-Army air ace. And since the war he had done stunt flying for several circuses. Service was a crackerjack sleuth. He had made an enviable reputation for himself in the U. S. Secret Service. As a team, these two had cleaned up a criminal ring operating on another well-known circus.

Musselman was the general manager of the Gavin-Garfield show, a shrewd business man sent to the lot to protect the interests of the majority owners. To him Groody presented his proposition. He and Service would get to the bottom of this mysterious conspiracy which was destroying the great show. They were both of proven reputations in that game. And, further, Groody would get two airplanes and do stunts to increase the waning interest in the show. The price was high: $2,000 a day. High—yet Musselman thought it was worth it.

They concluded their bargain, the price to be kept a secret from the other bosses of the show. Then Musselman introduced the pair around. Groody saw a lot that was wrong immediately. The other bosses, old time show people, hated Musselman. He was an outsider, and they resented his dominance; particularly, Jack Farrell, manager and twenty-five per cent owner of the show. And Groody found that he and Service were likely to be hated as Musselman men.

Groody witnessed some trouble that very first day. Musselman got into a scrap with Bronk O'Donnelly, the belligerent boss canvasman. O'Donnelly almost quit. And that would have seriously crippled the circus. But Jack Farrell intervened and the quarrel was patched up.

Next, an accident happened while the trapeze artists were doing their dangerous stunts. One of the swinging bars became loose and the star jumper went plunging towards the sawdust, outside the safety zone of the net. Groody jumped to the rescue and saved a life at the risk of his own. This heroism made him friends among the hostile troupers.

Another accident occurred that evening. The knife thrower almost killed his wife, who acted as the target for his knives. The knives were examined, and in half of them the blades had been loosened. This made the knife thrower's aim uncertain. Someone had plotted deliberate murder. A negro was hanging around the tent. One of Musselman's detectives whisked him outside. A shot rang out. The negro was dead

Grimly the troopers gather to face the roaring, destroying mob sweeping over the show lot—and with that epic battle a great serial comes to a smashing conclusion.

The detective said he had shot in self-defense.

Groody left the show to fetch the airplanes for his act. He and Bob Corrigan, a friend, flew the ships to the show lot.

Groody had come to suspect Farrell. And now he made an enemy of the manager, accusing him of trying to ruin the circus so he could buy out the majority interest.

Young, nephew of Musselman, arrived to assist in the flying act. Groody had Young pilot him in one of the planes, in a test flight. Satisfied with the new airman, Groody gave the signal to land. And then the motor stalled. Groody attempted to take control of the helpless ship. Young knocked him unconscious with a blow from a wrench. The plane crashed and was wrecked beyond repair. Young saved Groody's life, pulling him out of the flames. He apologized for his violence. Groody was puzzled and suspicious.

Service left for Chicago to secure information from the Federal authorities there.

During the performance that evening a violent storm blew up. Fearing damage from the gale, the managers rushed the show along. During a lull, a loud voice rang through the big top: "Run for it—she's coming down!" The panic-stricken crowd rushed for the exits. And Groody saw a man rise up before the elephants and toss something into the face of the leader. In terror, she broke loose and the whole herd followed in mad stampede.

Hoping to stop the stampede Groody caught onto the ear of the lead elephant. His attempt was vain and he was whirled off perilously through the night. Finally, he dropped to safety, and as the herd passed he saw a horseman galloping after, egging the animals on with revolver shots.

Groody tore back to the show lot. There, he got his plane and set out to follow the herd and that unknown horseman. From the air he spotted the elephants. The pursuing horseman, hearing the ship's motor, rode for cover. But Groody swooped low and scared the horse so that it threw its rider. He lay there unconscious while Groody made a hazardous landing. Groody picked up the injured man and sent him to a near-by town where he could be watched.

Groody returned to the show. He had astounding news for Corrigan. For it was Musselman who had stampeded the elephants.

Groody apologized to Farrell and told him of his discoveries. Together they planned to trap Musselman. Groody then explained the new developments to the bosses. They pledged him their support.

Next day, Groody staged an air act. With Corrigan piloting his plane, he walked the wings. Then, as arranged, Young flew his plane above the other so that Groody could swing up onto it by the ladder hanging from its underpart. And just as Groody reached out for that ladder, Young's plane swerved upward and Groody plunged into empty air. Corrigan caught Groody as he was falling and saved his life. They landed safely. They were convinced now of Young's treachery. For he had tried to murder Groody.

CHAPTER XXI

DEFIANCE

BY THE time they had landed many people were at the field, but when they saw that no one had been hurt their interest in the matter ended. Young was not yet down, due to the people overflowing the field, and the Army flyers, by their casual attitude, succeeded in making what had happened seem of little importance. Leather-lunged circus men were yelling: "Performance is now starting in the big tent!" Soon the field was practically deserted.

Musselman and Farrell and the other executives were busy, and would not have a chance to get to the field for a few minutes. Groody watched Young come down, while he talked swiftly to Corrigan. As the blond pilot leaped from his ship Corrigan said slowly:

"I don't know, George, but hop to it!"

"Gosh, that was a shave close enough to prune an ingrowing hair!" Young called blithely as he walked toward them. "Whew! Nice work, Groody!"

Groody's somewhat harsh countenance relaxed in a bleak smile. Young was the world's prize outlaw, without a doubt. Casual and smiling and at ease, he smiled straight into Groody's eyes.

"Feel that bump?" he inquired. "Hell of a time for it to hit us, wasn't it?"

"It was," Groody told him. "Young, your jig is up."

"You're firing me?" grinned the untroubled airman. "On account of a bump?"

"Sit down," Groody invited him, and Young did. Corrigan remained standing, very close to the carefree Young.

"Young, we know all we want to about you now, just as we know all we need to about Musselman," Groody told him deliberately.

"Well, what of it?" flashed Young, his face hardening a trifle.

"Just enough of it to allow me to give you the assurance that you'll spend the rest of your blooming youth in jail."

"For what?"

"Oh, several things," Groody told him calmly. "Conspiracy, attempted murder and——"

"Be yourself!" Young admonished him, but now his bright eyes were like gimlets, slightly narrowed, and the ever-present smile was a travesty on mirth.

"Knowing what we do, we of course appreciate your talents," Groody went on judicially. "We know that as far as the milk of human kindness is concerned, or any dislike for murder, or, in fact, any feelings at all except for Number One, you're entirely deficient. So much so that an extra double-cross or two, or biting the hand that feeds you, or selling your father's soul for the price of a drink, would be mere incidents to you. You'd as quickly murder for us, as against us, if the price was right. In other words, we're so sure you've got empty spaces where heart, morals and those things are concerned that we can use you."

Young bowed deeply.

"Thanks," he grinned cheerily. "Now, what's all this about?"

He was as unbreakable as tempered steel, which Groody had suspected. He was not only self-possessed; he seemed to be mocking them as he met their accusing eyes and listened untroubled to Groody's insults.

"Don't bluff," Groody bluffed himself. "We're closing in on Musselman and his gang: the men who are destroying the show and performing everything from burglary to murder to do it. We've found out plenty around here, and Tom Service and his connections in Chicago have found out plenty more. Among other things, we know something of your past career, realize that you are a Musselman man, and that at his orders you tried to bump me off today and doubtless had designs on Corrigan later. However, desiring to overlook no one in the roundup, we're holding off a few days, and will trade a few years in jail for help from such an elegant, polished and accomplished murderer and thug as yourself."

Young, his blond hair ruffling in the breeze, put his right hand toward his pocket, beneath the leather coat he wore. Quick as the dart of a snake's tongue, Groody's hand shot out and gripped Young's wrist.

"Don't make any moves like that," he warned as Corrigan bent over them.

Young threw back his head and laughed, a rollicking laugh which held considerable joy in life. For the moment he was a zestful boy.

"You've got the jimmies," he announced. "Search me, please! Can't a chap have a cigaret?"

And a package of cigarets was in the pocket, and of signs of artillery there were none about his person.

HAVING ignited his cigaret, Young leaned back on one elbow, and said calmly:

"This interests me. Admitting nothing at all, of course, still, what's the proposition you had in mind?"

"First," Groody told him spaciously, "let me elucidate your position to you. We've got Musselman standing with his back against the wall so hard he's making a hollow in it. Every reliable boss and performer on this show is in our confidence, and the entire troupe is an organized army watching Musselman, you, the trick detectives, and strangers—prepared for any emergencies. Skilled and reliable detectives arrive this evening and go to work on the show. There isn't a Chinaman's chance for you, Musselman, or one or two others to blow your nose without being watched. Tom Service, in Chicago, has seen to it that authorities for many a mile around have been warned, and some simple telegrams will result in the police of several States being on the lookout for fugitives whose descriptions they already have. You can't escape by boat, train or airplane, if you should start off this lot with an hour's lead on us this minute.

"So you see you're in no position to make a bargain with us. You've got to."

"This gets more interesting every minute," Young remarked easily. "What do I do?"

"Give us all the dope about Musselman's future plans, and any you haven't got, get for us from him," Groody answered. Sitting there in the sunlight, with the band music floating toward them and the flaunting banners of the circus seeming to incarnate the joyous excitement of circus day, it was difficult for the flyers, even, to realize the character of the outwardly placid, almost casual, conversation.

Young flipped the ash from his cigaret, and leaned back in a more restful position. Corrigan, bulking hugely over him, looked down at him and shook his head slightly, as though completely bewildered.

"Just what do you think is the lay?" Young inquired. "You've got me at sea, strange as it may seem. Musselman hired you, didn't he?"

"He hired us as an excuse for spending money and to make a bluff that he really wanted to clear up the mysteries around this show. Now he's convinced we're on the right trail, instead of the false ones he tried to head us off on. Probably he isn't sure, but evidently my yarn about seeing the horseman he hired to push the stampede along, plus the fact that I had to admit being near him when he started the stampede, has got him to a point where he thinks we *may* know something. And he, being a tender hearted, honest and upright man like yourself, figured that he had too much at stake to halt at a few more murders. He'd rather kill us off in a skilful way than have anything on his mind, we being in a position where the little undertaking party wouldn't be difficult to arrange.

"Having told you that he, and all of your gang, were in a parlous position, he set you to work.

"We want to know several things. One, the complete roster of his aids, in and out of the show. Two, just how much real knowledge of our information he has. Three, whether he really has got planned, in the town of Hinton, a final blow to the show, which we suspect. Four, if he has a scheme cooked up, whether he'll go through with it now. Five, what said scheme is——"

"And mind you," Corrigan broke in, "you've *got* to throw in with us. You can see where you stand. From this moment on you don't fly. We'll fix sickness or injury as an excuse. And furthermore, you won't be out of sight of a guard night or day from this moment on. The only time you'll be out of earshot, even, will be when you're getting dope from Musselman, if you haven't got it all already.

"And one more thing might as well go on the record right now. We don't promise that you go free. You stand trial, but as the merry custom is, you, a squealer, will get off more lightly than you deserve, and we'll testify to the exact truth where you're concerned."

"Thank you," Young grinned, his flashing eyes sweeping the landscape rapidly, and then focusing on the ground.

For a moment he seemed to be wrapped in thought. Then his eyes met Groody's, and he laughed.

"What a pickle I'm in!" he chuckled, for all the world as though he enjoyed it. "If I'm absolutely innocent, I'm guilty in your minds. And if you've got Musselman tied down, and have raked a few things out of my past, circumstantial evidence will convict me anyway. If I'm guilty, I'm no worse off. Either way, I've got to do as you say. That's simple, isn't it?

"Innocent or guilty, then, I've *got* to come through. No sane man would hold out a thing. You believe I'm guilty. And that makes it a hell of a note for me to have to tell you that I don't know one single damn thing about Musselman's future plans. You won't believe it—but I ask, can you imagine me lying?"

"I can imagine you doing anything," Groody told him. "You're as innocent as I am intelligent, which means zero. But there's just a chance that Musselman is the kind of a chap who doesn't like to let his right hand know what his left doeth, or doth, or whatever the hell it is. You may have been hired just to crack up ships, and then persuaded into a little murder to save your skin. Musselman, for instance, exaggerating such a matter as us closing in on you for our staged wreck, and saying that you were in a bad way for exposing me to that fire. We know why you did that, of course.

"Whichever way it is, though—whether you're telling the truth about what you know, or lying—one thing is sure. If you don't know anything now, you can find it out for us. We'll give you until the morning we arrive in Hinton, which is two days away, to come through.

"That's every bit of it. Bob, suppose you run over to the show, slip words of divers kinds into the busy ears of Jack Farrell, Bronk O'Donnelly, and so forth. By the time the show's over they'll know everything, and the little shadow system on our friend here will be arranged. I'll watch him until then."

Corrigan strolled off on his mission and Groody got himself a wrench from a tool-kit.

"In a few hours I'll have a gun," he informed Young. "Don't forget, now, that watchful guards will be something we've got nothing else but. The police of every town will cooperate, and the lot will be picketed to see that none of you beauties get out, even if you get away from us, which you won't. We'll just work that stunt until Hinton. If we don't get more dope there, we'll take our chances on confessions from Musselman or the dicks or somebody else. Nice day, isn't it?"

Somehow it seemed that that last facetious phrase stung the heretofore impregnable Young. His mask of blithe recklessness and disregard for consequences dropped from him, and savage, demoniac fury burned from his eyes. The handsome young flyer looked the cold-blooded, potential murderer then.

"Innocent, which I am, or guilty, which I'm not—either way I've got reasons, and I'm telling you, damn your soul, that you'd better watch yourself as well as me! You're going to get yours, you stinking buzzard, if I have to break jail to give it to you! Get that?"

"I get one point, anyhow," Groody told him judicially, "And that is that you've got guts!"

CHAPTER XXII

A KILLER IS KILLED

At seven-thirty that evening Groody was walking down the menagerie tent, in the lane next the cages. With him were Young and Gasley. Gasley and his brother operated the refreshment concessions of the show, and their butchers permeated ceaselessly through the audiences, selling everything from peanuts to pop. Groody was serving a few hours as Young's guard.

Short, genial faced Gasley glanced into the monkey cage. One of the little beasts was apparently sick. His fur was mangy, and his eyes dull. Gasley laughed.

"That monk looks like it belonged in the Gasley Brothers' show," he chuckled.

"Do you own a show of your own?" inquired Groody.

"No, but me and Bill've been talking of putting out a small show for years. It's the joke o' the show business. Last winter at winter quarters the gang fixed up a parade of every old wreck of a wagon they could drag together, had 'em painted with 'Gasley Brothers' Big Show' and a lot of other signs, and paraded through the town—Kincaid, Indiana. Whenever an animal dies or anything on any show in the country, about, I get a wire, like this: 'Beany, bull elephant, died today. Want him for the Gasley Show?' "

Young grinned. Since his abrupt flare-up that afternoon he had seemed to be his blithe self, as calm and cool as a man could be. With every hour of their enforced companionship, under the conditions, Groody was coming to realize more and more the hardness of the man. He seemed without fear of any kind, and his confidence in himself was prodigious.

Suddenly there came a terrific burst of snarls from the leopard cages.

"That Cora cat," nodded Gasley. "Bad leopard, Cora—an outlaw to her tail. She's in a tough spot. There's nine in the troupe, and two sets of four are relatives. Each four a gang, and Cora belongs nowhere. The two gangs fight each other whenever they get a chance, but they all gang up on Cora. She was bad enough before; now she ain't got a friend, but only enemies. Have to get rid of her, I guess."

They strolled into the back yard. They were in search of Bronk O'Donnelly. That is, Groody was. He had heard very interesting news from a certain frightened little negro girl who had been the late Hiram's sweetheart. Briefly, Hiram had told her, excitedly, that he had seen Hatwell handling the knife-thrower's tools, and Hatwell had become very nasty when he had seen he was observed. Hiram had not seen any tampering done by the detectives, but when so many knives were out of commission Hiram had rushed to his sweetheart, asked her advice, and had intended to tell Pop MacDonald his story.

"Seen Bronk O'Donnelly?" Groody asked Ed Wardell, who was lounging in the back yard.

From the big top came the murmur of the gathering crowd, undertoning the music of the band concert. The kinkers were wending their ways to the dressing rooms, to get ready for the opening spectacle. Gaudily bedizened elephants were ready, the animal men were in uniform, dozens of negro canvasmen who "Zulued" in the spectacle were painted like aborigines, and the entire lot was humming with industry.

"I think I saw him go into the pad room just now," returned Wardell, looking at Young with frank curiosity. Wardell was one of the men who had been told of the flyer's situation around the show. "Come on in and we'll see. I got to dress for the spec myself."

Everyone joined in the spectacle. It was a cause for increasing respect, commingled with admiration, to Groody to learn how versatile a real trouper was. Which sentiment he communicated to Young.

"Look at Fred Mygatt's wife," he pointed out. "You know—good looking, dark haired woman. She makes parade in the morning, goes into the spec at the opening of the show, fifteen minutes later is one of a dozen or so who do ladder acrobatics, then works the elephant herd in the middle ring, and finally rides a dancing horse and then a jumper in the races. If that isn't a day's work, done twice a day, digging the Panama Canal was an afternoon's diversion for a subway gang."

WARDELL smiled his slow smile as they approached the entrance to the men's dressing room.

"Circus families bring up their kids to troupe, all right," he said in his high voice. He was a curiously shy man, for all his fame.

"Were you born a showman?" Young inquired.

Wardell shook his head.

"No. Me and my sister—she was killed in the Hagenback-Wallace wreck three years ago—always was sort of good at acrobatics, and finally, when I was eleven and she was nine we ran away from home and worked a fair. Fifteen dollars for four days as a free attraction. An old-timer around suggested that we take up a collection after each performance. We just done easy stuff, of course. Just because we was kids, I guess, the money came in heavy. We divvied up four hundred and fifty dollars. It was mostly in change, and we could hardly get it home. When we got home and showed it to mama she screamed. 'Where'd you steal that?' she says."

"And from that time you were a trouper, eh?" grinned Groody.

"Uh-huh.. Well, here we are."

The big canvas room held lines of wardrobe trunks, set side by side, opened. In front of each a stool and a pail of water, and the entire cast was busy dressing for the spec.

"That's making up under difficulties," observed Young. "Must be tough on a muddy lot. Cold water to wash in——"

"It ain't so bad," grinned Wardell. "Some kick—those European outfits like Cassini there, of the riding troupe. They were accustomed to playing stadiums and theaters in the big cities for months at a time. Cassini's performed for every king, duke and big bug from Moscow to London. But they join in all right.

"There's Bronk, over talkin' to Fred Cary—dressed as a woman over there."

In a moment Groody had drawn the big boss canvasman out of the tent. Young, of course, was along. His eyes were roving, now, in the back yard, as the scantily costumed ballet girls were emerging from the ballet top. Several of the girls looked at him with favor, it seemed, and two of them spoke to him. His smile flashed out, and he called them by name.

"The first thing I was told around this show was 'Don't monkey with the ballet,'" observed Groody.

"If you do, don't let Jack Farrell or Bullion or Mygatt catch you," boomed O'Donnelly. "Well, what's the dope, Loot?"

Groody had not told Young previously about the Hatwell case, and he observed that the blond airman's eyes narrowed and were glinting oddly as he told O'Donnelly the story of the darky sideshow girl.

"I'm going to brace him right now, and try to swap a life sentence for execution if he'll shoot his wad," Groody concluded. "And I'd like to have you along, in case of trouble. You know all the tricks. He ought to talk."

"Maybe he'll be like Young, here," O'Donnelly said musingly, his dark eyes on the flyer. "But, by God, we're gettin' somewheres, ain't we?"

"You think you are," Young said disdainfully. "Hatwell like me, eh? If he is, he won't talk because he can't."

"That's your story and you'll stick to it, eh?" Groody said sardonically.

Suddenly Young seemed to be lashed into a cold, consuming fury. When he spoke, though, his words were slow and cold.

"God, if I was only where I could get a square break with you! I'd ram every word down your neck, damn you, and I'll live to do it if I have to outlast the cell you railroad me to!"

"Shut up!" roared O'Donnelly.

"Who thinks he can make me?" snarled Young contemptuously.

"I can, by the powers, and I will right now——"

"Two hundred and twenty pounds, six feet two, tough hombre, eh?" gibed Young. "Why, you bloated piece of cheese, because you knock starving laborers around don't think I couldn't knock your back teeth loose. Come on, damn you!"

"Come on, cut it out!" snapped Groody. "Never mind him, Bronk. He——"

"Don't stop him—or yourself, either!" Young said with a sort of contained ferocity. Nor did he stop there.

His tongue played around them with deadly insults. He seemed to be venting an abysmal hatred for them both. And such was the power of his feeling that both men stood amazed, without resenting it. A man in Young's position, daring the men in whose power he was, utterly unafraid and unsubdued—it was uncanny.

Groody felt certain misgivings as Young tried his best to make them resent his insults. Seemingly no guilty man could act as Young did. Had the carefully reared structure of deductions been built on a poor foundation?

It couldn't be. That sawed feedline, the incident of the day. . . .

"Come on!" Groody snapped. "Go ahead and talk, if it makes you feel better."

"And come quick!" blared O'Donnelly. He was looking at Young as though he was some new species of freak.

And Young went with them. For a moment he was silent. Then, with great urbanity, he said:

"Got a cigaret, Groody?"

Groody had one, and Young smoked tranquilly as they strolled around the lot, to find Corrigan. That having been accomplished, Young was turned over to the big flyer, who was chinning with Pop MacDonald, and Groody and O'Donnelly made their way to the big top. They had their line of procedure decided by the time they had spotted Hatwell.

HATWELL had been transferred from the sideshow to the big top, where he worked as a red shirted property boy. He was sitting leaning against a center pole, watching the crowd gather.

"We want to see you outside, Hatwell," Groody told him. "Something's just broken, I think."

The cadaverous, fishy eyed detective got up without a word, and they let him out past the stake and chain wagon, well out of earshot of anyone else and out of ight, for that matter. The glow of the ot lights did not penetrate that far.

"Well, Hatwell, the jig's up."

That was the signal, and in a split second the flyer and O'Donnelly had the stunned detective's arms pinioned. Groody's hand went inside the ragged flannel shirt, and drew the gun from its shoulder holster.

"What the hell? Why, damn you——"

"Shut up!" barked Groody. "You're caught. We've got the whole story of your tampering with the knives, we know you're working for Musselman trying to break up this show, and we know you murdered that Hiram nigger!

"Now, by God, you've got to talk and talk fast. If you tell everything you know, you can get to spend the next few years in jail instead of pushing up daisies!"

They had released him, because he was unarmed and they both had guns. And the guns were in their hands, ready.

Hatwell stood motionless, like an unkempt statue. His light gray eyes seemed to glisten like ice through the darkness. It was as though they were holes in his head, round openings with light behind them.

"Come clean, and work for us as a stool pigeon from now on," Groody urged him. "You've got everything to gain, and nothing to lose."

But Mr. Hatwell was hard to capture, apparently. As the two guns came down when O'Donnelly and Groody relaxed, Hatwell made his move. So quickly that he seemed to have been swallowed up by the earth, he had whirled and leaped away into the darkness, bound for the woods close by. If he reached their shelter he could make his way back into the mountains.

"Stop!" roared O'Donnelly furiously, and he and Groody leaped ahead after the almost invisible fugitive, several yards in the lead.

"Stop, I tell you!"

Groody's pistol cracked, and a second later O'Donnelly's. And at the second report, the vague form ahead lurched ahead, and dropped prone.

"Great God! You got him. I shot in the air!" panted Groody.

O'Donnelly had got him, and got him completely. Straight through the heart, from the back, the bullet had gone, and Hatwell was utterly and entirely dead.

The flyer, dazed by the sudden sequence of events, strove to get hold of himself and think logically. Apparently no one had noticed the shots in the hurly burly of assorted noises around the show. There they were, alone, with a dead man.

"God, what a break!" Groody said savagely. "He's useless now, but that isn't all. This shooting'll warn every man jack of the gang that something's up, and ruin everything! You may be in a lot of trouble, too, Bronk, unless we prove that everything we think is true. That dark girl's story is all right, of course."

"What the hell'll we do?" O'Donnelly gulped helplessly.

A thousand things shot through Groody's mind, and there seemed to him to be but one solution. But no amount of thinking could take any of the menace from the tragic contretemps which had come so suddenly.

"I didn't even aim!" muttered the Irishman moodily. "Not that I feel bad. He was nothin but a skunk. But murder ain't pleasant to be tried for."

"Listen, Bronk," Groody interrupted decisively. "If you're held in this town for this we'll have lost the biggest single factor in making the Hinton party, if any, a success. You're holding the canvasmen together. Second, if this leaks out, the whole scheme'll be ruined, and you'll have just about five hundred per cent less chance of coming out scotfree as you would if we can lay all the evidence in front of the court—the whole plot, and Hatwell's share, and his murder.

"Hinton's day after tomorrow. We've got to keep this under our hats until then, get rid of this body temporarily, and wait. Nobody'll miss him for a day or so. Anyway, we've got to take a chance. If we're caught, we've got a reasonable explanation—reasons for what we've done. We'll see Jack Farrell and let him and Bob Corrigan and enough others in on it to help protect ourselves.

"But what can we do with this body? Somebody's liable to come any minute."

"The doc's a good egg," whispered the overwrought boss. "Let's see him, eh? Hide him in the bushes, now."

Groody felt almost like a real murderer as they stealthily hid the limp body. The knowledge of the position he and O'Donnelly might find themselves in, if anything went wrong, was a crushing mental burden.

His face was bleak and cold as he and the white faced O'Donnelly found the doctor and told their tale. The medico, who always seemed to need a shave, listened quietly while O'Donnelly went to find Farrell and Corrigan.

"I—I'm willing to do anything proper to help out, of course," he said slowly. "I can fix up the body, if Mr. Farrell says the word. I'm willing to chance any—er—complications which may arise."

In a few moments Corrigan and Farrell were there for a counsel of war, and the final agreement was along the lines Groody had suggested to O'Donnelly. They successfully smuggled the body into the doctor's wagon, and finally, wrapped in a huge roll of canvas, it was put into the back of the stake and chain wagon by men who did not know what their burden was. There it would have to stay, as an extra piece of unused canvas, for two days.

The circus train, that night, carried much in addition to its tangible cargo. Mounting excitement, sharpening anticipation—and a dread of the possibilities ahead in the minds of the men who knew the load the stake and chain wagon was carrying.

"Oh, hell," Groody told himself as the train rumbled out of town, "if all goes well we don't have to worry. And if it don't go our way, I probably won't be in any better shape than Hatwell is now. Jails won't worry me as much as a suitable tombstone."

Groody was expecting no picnic in Hinton.

CHAPTER XXIII

UNDER GUARD

A DAY later, in the flourishing town of Knightstown, West Virginia, Mr. Thomas Service and Mr. George Groody were seated in the big top, apparently watching the afterpiece. This "riotous musical comedy production, rivaling the Broadway shows in beauty, speed and talent," was offered the customers for the small sum of twenty-five cents, the fourth part of a dollar according to the ticket sellers, following the completion of the main performance. It consisted of the ballet girls as a chorus and George Byers, a woman singer and a dancer as principals.

Another feature of the afterpiece was Mr. Igor Slavinsky. In private life the cauliflower-eared Mr. Slavinsky was but a humble ticket taker on a big top gate, but twice a day he came into the spotlight as an artist. He was a wrestler, challenging any local champion to stay with him five minutes without being thrown.

Occasionally, one accepted, but usually a "plant", one of the canvasmen, assumed the rôle. A subtle bit of showmanship lay in the fact that Mr. Slavinsky always lost. For a few minutes he would escape being thrown by the barest of margins, and during that time would gnash his teeth with rage, shake his head ferociously, and indicate very plainly that he was furious at being outmatched. All this to the huge delight of the crowd.

"This stage treat doesn't interfere much with Bronk O'Donnelly, does it?" queried Tom Service mildly, but behind his glasses his eyes were aglow with enjoyment.

It did not. Not one second was lost to the Gavin-Garfield circus because of the afterpiece. While Byers and others were warbling melodiously, and the ballet was flitting lightly about, from all over the big top there came the clatter of falling seats, the yells of drivers and the rumble of wagons. The spectators were herded in one small section directly in front of the center ring, and that was the only part of the tent which was sacred. Bronk rushed hither and yon, stimulating his men. Occasionally the band happened to stop playing at an embarrassing moment. Tom Service nearly fell off his seat when, as the music stopped abruptly, O'Donnelly's great voice filled the top:

"C'mon there, Fishy! Get that blasted wagon up here! Shake it up a little, shake it up a little!"

"We can't talk here," chuckled Groody. "The theater is a poor place to transact business in."

The newly arrived Service followed him out, and they flopped on the grass near the light wagons.

"Now let's get everything straight in our minds, from both sides," Tom said abruptly. He was polishing his glasses, and his unshielded eyes were bright and keen. "You shoot first."

"Well, remember that I telephoned you about Hatwell, one of Musselman's dicks.

and his killing a negro who was supposed to be meddling with the knives? We had to kill Hatwell when I tried to bluff him into confessing that he himself had done that knife stuff, which I found out."

HE TOLD the story briefly, while Service's face grew more and more solemn.

"And," Groody concluded, "Young knew we were going to see Hatwell, and now that his disappearance is creating curiosity, Young's looking at me in a highly peculiar way. If he and Musselman knew that this show was carrying Hatwell's corpse——"

"There'd be hell to pay, and there will be yet unless we can uncover a hell of a lot of evidence," Service finished for him. "And about ten people in on it, eh? God Almighty. Let's watch and pray, George."

"We'll have to. One thing to pray for is that we don't get into Young's power before the blow-off. He or Musselman could have us all clapped in jail the second that corpse was found!"

"And even men of your talents aren't much good in jail," said Tom. "Well, move on."

"The second thing is that that bird I got bucked off his horse back in Ohio cracked his skull, damn it, and is still only one jump ahead of hell. Can't do any talking or anything yet—a total loss as far as evidence is concerned.

"Number three. Those detectives you sent on from Chicago to watch Musselman's men haven't found out a thing. The entire mob is evidently laying low. Not making a move until Hinton, probably."

"Let's hope there'll be a move in Hinton," nodded Tom.

"On the bright side, we've got the little darky girl's story, and also Dad Mettal's. Dad went back over the trail, and dug up a man in Highland with a suit for damages against the show who told the truth. That was that a Chicago lawyer had searched him out and told him that he'd fight the suit through for nothing except a share in what he got, and that he'd guarantee that would be triple the amount that the fellow was offered by Mettal as a cash settlement on the spot. Dad just got in tonight. Lawyer is Amos Rosenberg."

"I'll wire Chicago and have him covered," nodded Service with vast satisfaction. "That means that we can probably tie up a certain number of exorbitant suits against the show to Musselman. This lawyer's probably been mooching around all the time, stimulating suits against the show."

"Sure. Which'll help. That ends my story, except for Young. That bird hasn't found out a thing as yet, and he acts as though he was sitting on top of the world and that the rest of us are scum. And I can't imagine a guilty man in his position holding out on us. If Hinton was any farther away I'd go crazy."

"On the one hand," Service reminded him, "we're pretty sure Musselman suspects us enough to have tried to get rid of us, and on the other hand we expect that he'll go on with the scheme. The two things don't jibe, George."

"I know they don't," Groody agreed savagely. "The more I mull it over the more I think I'll be just as badly off tomorrow night as we are tonight. But a few days, I figured, wouldn't make any great difference on the round-up, and just the bare chance that something *might* go on——"

"Musselman hasn't shown by look or word that he does feel afraid of us, eh?"

"No."

"Well, if Musselman doesn't suspect us, it means that you've misjudged Young."

"I know it," granted the harried Groody. "But I just know, Tom. He's the eighth wonder of the world, though, Young is. Maybe we should have just closed in on Musselman right off the reel, without trying to get everybody in the world in our net."

"No," stated Tom. "There's no harm in waiting, of course. And it may be that Musselman, even if he thinks we think he's guilty, will go through with it if he's got a final blow for the show in store. For several reasons. One, confusion enough to facilitate his escape. Two, maybe a chance to get us out of the way. Three, a final revengeful souvenir. And, of course, he knows that if we're wise to him we've got so much on him that another little item will make no difference. One murder rates as much electric juice as five, you know.

"Well, anyway, I'm satisfied that we've got Musselman where we want him, and can unravel everything concerning him easily," Tom said gently. "I didn't absolutely get the goods on him in Chicago, but I found out that he'd been fraternizing more or less secretly with three former carnival owners whose shows were the strongest outfits on the road. That means something. And when I found that he'd been under suspicion for grafting on county fair matters, that means a little more. Mr. James, his father-in-law, is satisfied with the fact that Musselman is capable of doing it, too, and he has some additional items of evidence to bring forth. As I told you, Musselman's wife is dead, and he and the old man have had several spats. James said, though, that Musselman was one of the smartest showmen in America, and that he believes the fact that Mrs. Musselman's recent death caused Musselman to believe that he wouldn't inherit any of the old boy's dough, so he just stepped out to get his circus. The old man told him about that in one of their brawls, although he really didn't mean it entirely at the time."

"Well, as long as these carnival men are being watched and investigated, I suppose that getting the goods on 'em is just a matter of time," Groody said, watching the crowd streaming from the aftershow with absent eyes. "You say this detective agency which is handling all the different angles for us—or old man James, I should say—is as good as one of the big ones?"

"Better, man for man," Service said promptly. "They've got some of the keenest ex-Government and city operatives you ever saw. And it's sure a relief to know that our business is just in the show, now."

"Right," stated Groody, an unlit cigar appearing in his hand. Whenever he was doing any low and lofty thinking his hand always groped for one of those cigars. "Just for my own satisfaction, though, I hope something does happen in Hinton. Musselman really does stand in strong there, does he?"

"So James said. When we get there the detectives will have gathered all possible information on that subject. As I see it, we've got Musselman, and only Musselman, definitely in our power. Unless he squeals, all his henchmen will probably go free for lack of evidence. That is, if they continue to lie low. Even Young. Funny how I couldn't raise a thing about him, and yet he cheerfully admitted things in his past to you which he granted would act against him, eh? As you say, I sure hope that Musselman, either in ignorance or in desperation, had something cooked up in Hinton and will go through with it. Sort of polish off the case. We were correct, I believe, in the belief that it'll be damn hard to wring any confessions out of these hard-boiled birds. It'll be fight all the way, and ironclad proof, in court. Even your mouse story might be challenged.

"Incidentally, it was a lucky break for us that you had brains enough to figure the animals as a point of attack during that storm. You did yourself proud. I believe you're commencing to show signs of consciousness in this business!"

Groody grunted.

"Pretty lucky," he stated. "So old man James finally hit the ceiling and is right behind us, eh? How'd he let things go so long?"

"He owns a string of little theaters all over the Middle West, had a fight with another outfit on, is building new theaters, runs a booking office, and all in all is a man of very large interests. This show was sort of a paying toy with him. Said he liked to travel with it a few days once in a while and sniff the sawdust again. When it got to losing a lot of money the dough itself didn't mean bankruptcy or anything, but he just had more important affairs on his mind. And he trusted Musselman. They thought, James said, that it was just a jinx, for a while, and then that some other outfit, although that was hard to believe, was on their trail. Then James had an idea it might be some people he'd had a war with around Chicago—cutthroat proposition between their one theater and one of his own—which left 'em broke and sore. But the net of the proposition was that he himself was gambling with millions and couldn't let a half-million dollar circus cut into his own personal time. Musselman, incidentally, asked for the job."

"There she goes!" Groody cried involuntarily, and with fascinated eyes watched the billowing white sea of canvas drop in pale gray waves to the ground.

NOW the lot was flat, hundreds of shadowy figures running here and there under the beams of the searchlights above the flyer's head. Plank wagons were rumbling from the lot, pole wagons being loaded, and soon the show would be on its way to the runs.

"Well," Service remarked, "Young has his last chance tonight, doesn't he? We meet him at the train, you say? If he hasn't got any dope, at that, it isn't a positive cinch that he wasn't guilty of trying to murder you. Musselman may be the kind of a gink that absolutely refuses to let any underling know his real plans. Not likely, but possible. It'll sort of make the thing more intricate if Young has nothing to say. It just won't seem right. You say that Musselman and Young have both been completely covered the last few days?"

"Absolutely, unless the circus men are lying. Bob's with Young now, and between Jack Farrell, myself, and Bullion, Musselman hasn't had a moment when he was unwatched. Young has talked with Musselman alone, but in sight of one of us, and Musselman has made several telephone calls to Chicago which were impossible for us to listen in on. But, in general, they haven't even talked to anybody, personally, whom we don't know. There hasn't been a move on either one's part to consult anyone suspicious. Like those fake detectives, for instance."

"Young's pretending to have a sprained wrist to excuse his not flying, you said?"

"Yep. Got it in a sling, even."

Service was silent for a moment, his round eyes flitting over the lot. Then he eased his chunky body from the ground, and said:

"Well, tomorrow'll tell the tale. Let's wander around and ride down to the train in the truck. We'll see Young and Corrigan, and then you can go to bed. Sort of tough on you, this sleeping all over the lot business. Planes both in shape?"

Groody nodded.

"Let's not wait for the truck," he proposed. "Ride one of these wagons down, and watch how a real horseman handles a team!"

Which they did, Service on a canvas wagon and Groody perched atop a pole wagon, directly behind him. It was pleasant to rock along through the quiet streets, guided by those flares set on corners, and to listen to the chat of the weazened old Parader Pete.

When Groody asked him how he got his name the old showman chuckled.

"With the Curry wagon show, back in ninety-three," he answered. "We made the longest parade ever heard of in the show business, and I handled an eight hoss team all the way."

"How come?" Groody egged him on.

"We was showin' Jarvis, New York, and business had been bad. When we got to town the sheriff comes up and gits ready to plaster an attachment on the show. Old Pluto Curry says, says he: 'Now listen, Sheriff, if we do a good business in this town we can pay that bill. Don't crab our parade, anyways—give us a break. It'll help business, and we kin mebbe pay off if we git good crowds.'

"So the sheriff, he says, 'All right.' I don't rightly know, but they's some trick in that attachment business where stuff can't be plastered in transit or somethin'. Anyways, it was a New York State jedgement, and we starts off the lot without unpackin' and parades from Jarvis, New York, to New Brunswick, New Jersey without a stop!"

Groody laughed loud and long, and the grizzled driver chuckled with mirthful recollection.

"My fingers—I couldn't move 'em when we got there," he chattered on. "One other time they got that way. In Frisco it was, with the John Robinson outfit. Paradin', we was goin' down a hill, me drivin' a cage o' lions, eight hosses drawin' it. You know them hills in Frisco? Well, this was a sure-'nough cliff. The brake give way, and it was all the hosses could do to keep ahead o' the wagon. We was goin' like hell. Two blocks down, the street ended. Yuh had tuh go right or left. Lots o' people there, too. I had a great pair o' leaders—Ned and Cleopatra, I called 'em—and I took holt. Well, sir, I swung that team to the left without never tippin' over the wagon. But God, my fingers was pulled half off and my shoulders was ruint.

"Speakin o' lions, I remember when I was with the Al J. Kairns' show—great animal show, that is—it come time to parade and the door into one cage o' lions jest dropped off. Old Man Kairns, he didn't want to hold things up, so we puts a piece o' cardboard over the openin' and parades that way!

"Lots o' guts, old Al had. He's a heller."

Despite slow walking horses and a rickety and far from luxuriously riding wagon, the three mile ride was over in two seconds less than nothing, as far as Groody was concerned. As he hopped off the wagon, alongside the flats, Tom was waiting for him.

They picked their way through the yard,

alongside the long white train. It was on an outside siding, and there was a high bank to their right, on which was growing soot-covered grass. Ahead of them, alongside the sleeping cars, almost the entire regiment of performers was sitting along the bank. Ukeleles were strumming, tobacco smoke scented the air, the privilege car was aglow with light. The lovable, childlike Bedouins of the big top were having their one hour of ease.

"You ought to watch Bronk O'Donnelly come down the line when the train's somewhere the kinkers can gather like this," Groody informed Tom. "It's against the rules for any of the ballet girls and male members of the show to get the least bit friendly, you know. Can't even be seen talking together. A matter of necessary discipline. But, of course, they do it on the sly, being human. There's Brad Kestler, who works that troupe of white horses, with one of the ballet now.

"Well, anyhow, when the truck with the bosses gets down to the train, Bronk's the first one off. He leads the way down the line, talking at the top of his voice. That tips all the boys and girls off that the bosses are among 'em, and one or the other of each pair just sort of melt away before Jack Farrell gets his eye on 'em.

"Great boy, Bronk."

"He sort of holds this show together, at that," agreed Service. "Where do you suppose we'll find Young and Bob?"

"Somewhere along. Young has a weakness for the ballet, and probably we'll find him parked next to one with Bob as chaperon."

WHICH proved to be an exact estimate of the situation. Furthermore, Corrigan himself was making caricatures of various performers for the edification of another member of the merry-merry.

Groody and Service did not need to say anything, however, in order to pry them loose from their companions. In a moment the quartette were walking down the tracks to get out of earshot of the troupers.

Young's eyes were hard, but his golden-brown face smiling debonairly, as always, when he faced his Nemesis.

"What's the news?" demanded Groody.

"None!"

Young threw it in their faces carelessly. "I told you there wouldn't be," he went on. "There's no sense of my repeating that I'm no closer to Musselman's plans than you are, and that I'm as innocent as a new born babe. Let me repeat that I'd be crazy as a loon to hold out on you, and I'd be glad to save my neck if I could, but I can't. If Musselman's got something scheduled, I don't know it.

"Take that and be damned to you, Groody, and remember what I said. You three have hounded me, and are going to hound me into jail. I'm convinced of that. But I'd crawl on my hands and knees from here to Kingdom Come to get even with you, and if you're alive, any or all of you, when I get out I'll get you and get you good!

"If I can do it before I get behind the bars, railroaded there, I'll do it too, and you'll have something to put me in the hoosegow for! I'd take on any two of you right now, and fight with anything from fists to guns, you smart guys!"

Immobile, with eyes flashing, his snarling mouth seemed to drop those words like so many drops of venom. Straight and slim and unafraid, he snapped his fingers in their faces.

"And don't think," he said deliberately, "that you're quite as smart as you think you are. You and your mice! Why say, if I was really sure that you were going to get anywhere important, you'd be behind the bars now! If Musselman and I were so close, and crooks of a feather, we'd have got rid of you long before this!"

"A minute ago," Groody told him, "you were convinced we were going to succeed in hounding you into jail. Now you're bragging that you could escape it if you wanted to."

"A slight error," Young answered with sudden blitheness. "What I meant was that you can hound me into jail because I'm on the level. If I really was a candidate—on this job, anyhow—for a deserved jail sentence, I'd be part of a gang on this show, wouldn't I? And if I was that, I could see to it that I escaped and that you couldn't follow me!"

"Why don't you do it anyway, then?" Tom inquired mildly.

Young grinned.

"Maybe I'll join up right quick, and do it," he told them. His sudden changes of mood were startling. "Damned if I wouldn't, if I really thought there was anything to join!"

Groody got the idea that Young was trying to bewilder them with his vague insinuations.

"Anyhow, you remember what I said about *you* doing a little waiting in jail? There's a lot of speculation about Hatwell, boys, and there are those who thought they heard shots the other night when he so mysteriously disappeared. A little complaint to the authorities would hold you in the hoosegow for a few days, anyway. If I wanted to, I mean.

"Hell, it's too much trouble, and you don't amount to enough. Wouldn't do me much good, anyhow. You'd get out, I suppose, and I'd be just as much in the soup as ever. I prefer to leave you where I can see you, and maybe get a chance to pay you back quickly."

"Young, you're a good man—too good a man to be mixed up in this stuff," Groody told him. "What the hell do you see in——"

"Shall we join in silent prayer?" gibed Young. "Your words affect me, Brother Groody. Hallelujah! If I get washed of sin and join the Salvation Army will you lay off me?"

There was something wolfish in his grin as he looked at them, and Groody shook his head.

"I fear you're a complicated case," he remarked, and with all his heart he admired the iron in the man's soul as much as he was repelled by what he was convinced was the utter depravity within that handsome shell.

"And now what the hell are you going to do about it?" Young inquired. "Can I go to my couch, and sleep a while?"

"With pleasure," Groody told him.

"I'll rock you to sleep," Tom Service said. "Bob, you and Groody have got to have some sleep. See you in Hinton. So long."

Groody and Corrigan plowed back to the deserted lot, speculating continuously about Young's casual hints concerning Hatwell.

"He can't know anything," was Groody's conclusion, "or he'd use it. Damn it, he gives me the willies. If ever I was positive, in my mind, of a man's crookedness, it's his, but he keeps me arguing with myself to prove to myself that what I know is true is true!"

"Put that in writing," suggested Corrigan. "I couldn't follow it. But I'd give a shekel or two to know the story of his life, at that."

They paid off their guard on the ships, and Corrigan lay down to sleep the first half of the night. Groody, gun ready, waited and watched. They dared not sleep at the same time.

The moon rode high in the sky and the lanky, saturnine flyer sat with his chin in one hand, staring across the barren lot. The morrow would tell the tale. Everything would be over, for better or worse. He hoped that they could stay with the show a while longer, for the sake of the money and because the novelty of it had not worn off, as yet.

His mind flitted from the oil fields to those days of high adventure in France; from Nagasaki to the tense weeks with the Levin-Willet carnival. He was content, because Hinton, and possible climax, lay just around the corner, but already he felt the vague stirring within him which meant that soon the life that he was leading would be wrung of its novelty. That meant "move on."

Perhaps it was serenity of the moon and the tranquillity of the night, but for the moment the spirit of him was softened. One of his occasional introspective moods was upon him, and he was aware that existence for him had been curiously flat and unsatisfactory. There had been a few high peaks of joyous contentment, but always another had been in sight which turned out to be a mirage.

He had never found his heart's desire, and right then he felt that he never would. Once in a while the realization of that fact came to him with such humbling force that the truth of it seemed unassailable.

Which feeling comes, with ever-increasing force, to wanderers all the world around.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HAWK ATTACKS

IT WAS one o'clock in the afternoon of the next day, and Groody was standing beside his ship. He and Corrigan had just landed after doing their stunts. The show lot was a quarter of a mile away, and the field was a sloping pasture on the side of a low mountain. A little further away, the hills were from four to six thousand feet high, hemming in the town of Hinton. Here and there the openings of mine shafts could be seen, and drab colonies of company houses, as much alike as so many cracker boxes, were additional evidence of the fact that they were in the coal country. So isolated was the field that what few visitors had preferred to look at the ships instead of the circus had departed.

Groody paced up and down restlessly.

"The guard ought to get here pretty quick," he told Corrigan. "Every minute away from that lot means a minute I don't enjoy."

"I'd like to see what's going on myself," agreed Corrigan. "I wonder whether Tom'll wait for us at the lot or——"

"Here he comes now."

An aged taxicab came into sight, bouncing up the rutted dirt road which ran close to the lumpy pasture. From it there emerged Mr. Thomas Service, and a moment later he was coming across the field with short, choppy, strides. His horn-rimmed glasses glinted blindingly in the sun, which caused Groody to remark:

"He must have just cleaned 'em, and that means news."

"What ho?" inquired Corrigan while Service was still fifteen feet away.

"Looks as though we were right on the trail," beamed Service. "There's been a half dozen dicks, as I told you, around this town and they've accomplished plenty. In the first place, from all signs, all bets are on."

Groody grinned beatifically.

"You don't say! Shoot!"

"It's all a little vague, but apparently well founded. The idea is that this town has always been poison to circuses since the time a few years back when a jerkwater show just took the whole surrounding country for about everything the people had. There's a tough bunch of young miners, and so forth, around, and they usually try to crash the gate. Five years ago two of 'em were killed in the mêlée with a show. It's got to be a regular sport.

"This year, from all signs, it's been pepped up to be bigger and better than ever. Several men have been smoking matters up. A whole bunch of mountaineers, drunker than seven million dollars, are in town for circus day, besides, and they're spoiling for a fight. The detectives have three agitators, so to speak, spotted already, and it seems reasonable to assume that Musselman and his gang have just planted a few men whose object is to start one of these clems—using the show term—such as used to take place in every college town."

"Funny how a circus is always fair game for the roughnecks," nodded Groody.

"Well, this bids fair to be a darb, if it goes on. No doubt the idea was to start a lot of excitement, and all that, and then a few men, or a few dozen, just seize the chance to do a lot of definite damage. Maybe start the elephants again, or break a lot of heads, or steal the money from the ticket wagon—God knows what. Anyway, put the last kibosh on the show."

"Well, that means we've got to hustle over——"

"Wait a minute. This police chief thing. There seems no doubt he's a dear friend of Musselman's, and there is no doubt at all that the police, for two reasons, wouldn't turn over a hand. There aren't many of 'em, and they're thoroughly scared of any mass demonstration from embattled miners or mountaineers. As a matter of fact, unknown grifters have already run wild in town, robbing a few houses and picking a whole trainload of pockets, and the dope is out all over that Gavin-Garfield is coming in here to clean the town right. Musselman claimed that this was the town where we'd land these mysterious thugs who've been dogging the show. Well, far from that, the cops aren't turning over a hand but are steaming up the town about the number of crooks the show's brought into it. Which all helps the clem that's scheduled, no doubt, for tonight. I shouldn't be surprised if they just raided the lot and raised hell—so much of it that it wouldn't end even on the train. There are more possibilities, of course. Damage suits, attaching the show—everything."

"God almighty!" ejaculated Corrigan. "This is a civilized country—or isn't it? Mean to say that there's no law on our side?"

"Plenty, but it's a long ways away," Service told him. "Except for two young men who seem to be able to help us. And the private detectives. I refer to two State policemen. To get to the point, they've been talked to, everything told to 'em, and right now they've got this chief police in a private place and are showing gns of breaking him down. It wouldn't rprise me at all if he came through, and e roundup took place this afternoon and e clem stalled off. More state troopers'll e in, too, and if the worst come to worst pitched battle may not end up against e show."

"It all brings on another thought," Groody stated. "Chances now are two to ne that Musselman's actions for the past ew days have not been deceiving at all—hat he does not suspect that we're wise o him. He wouldn't go through with ll this stuff, but would call it off, robably."

"And that," Corrigan put in ruefully, means that we were wrong about Young eliberately trying to murder you. If he's n with Musselman at all it was just as a py, sort of, to see what we were doing. That wreck that you two had, and the awed feedline, may have been staged—robably was. But there's a possibility it asn't just a sort of miraculous break in hat feedline. But even if it *was* staged to ake Young out a life-saver and get him n strong, it doesn't mean that he tried to urder you, or is capable of it, for that atter. And, of course, his failure to get nformation is the clincher—unless he's a ut."

"Well, when his ship hopped up in the ir that time there wasn't any bump, it was oor flying, and taken with all the other ngles to the situation we were justified n thinking as we did," Groody maintained. Gosh, we sure waded into him if he was nocent!"

"And yonder he comes," remarked Serice. "Jack Farrell, Musselman, Bullion nd Young. Those babies have sure been uarded, eh what?"

"It's a wonder Musselman didn't get ise," grinned Groody. "But, of course, arrell's done most of the Musselman hadowing, and it was easy to make exuses to talk with his chief all day long. Vonder what they're doing out here?"

"Wondering why you didn't make your arachute jump, maybe," Corrigan sugested. "To those birds a little matter of ountains and woods and about five square et of clearing within fifteen miles doesn't ean a thing."

As the four men, who had arrived in one f the show trucks, walked slowly across the field, Groody lifted his head inquiringly.

"Anybody hear an airplane motor?" he asked, and his eyes swept the sky quickly. There was not even a speck against the blue, but that drone grew ever louder.

"There isn't one in sight, but one's coming," Corrigan said. "Must be a big one. That sounds like a Liberty to me."

"More than one of 'em," Groody interrupted. "There she is!"

A big plane came hurtling over a mountain peak to the west, and in a moment Groody gave his judgment.

"A Martin Bomber—two motors. It must be off course. There's a landing field at Moundsville, you know, on the Dayton-New York-Washington route."

"He's going to land," Corrigan remarked. "He's diving already. Say, these Jennies don't look very impressive now, do they?"

THEY did not. The great four ton bomber, its two four hundred and fifty horsepower motors now partly throttled, was settling majestically. In a moment it was circling the field, the twelve cylinder Libertys bellowing along and creating deafening echoes from the mountainsides. The four showmen had stopped in their tracks at some little distance from the ships, and all seven men watched the big bomber glide into the field and land without a bump. It had an Army number on its side, and the concentric circles of the Army Air Service decorated both lower and upper wings.

It stopped rolling a few yards from the eastern boundary fence, and the pilot taxied a bit further, turning on the right hand motor and swinging the ship around in its tracks. Groody and Corrigan ran toward it as the two men in the front cockpit climbed out. They did not stop their motors.

"Probably lost and want to know where they are," suggested Groody. "If so, this field and these airplanes must have been a pleasant sight to 'em!"

Both Army flyers were in overalls. One started to look over the left hand motor, and the second one walked forward to meet Groody. His overalls fitted tightly over his shoulders, and the two bars of a captain were outlined clearly.

He was a small, slim man with a face so thin as to seem emaciated. Black eyes burned from their sockets, and his sallow face seemed lined and careworn.

"Does either of you happen to be named Groody?" he inquired abruptly.

"Right here."

"Glad to know you. Heard a lot about you when you were in the Army. I'm Captain Florence, McCook Field at Dayton."

He shook hands with Corrigan and Groody, and then fished inside his coveralls and brought forth some papers.

"You're flying for the Gavin-Garfield circus, aren't you?" he demanded in his terse, nervous way. "Got a man with you going under the name of Young?"

"We sure have," stated Groody. "What about him?"

"Does he look anything like this?" demanded Florence, and brought forth a blurred newspaper photo.

It might have been Young, there was no doubt of that, but then again the photo was so indistinct that it might not have been the blond airman. The man in the picture was dressed in an Army uniform, adorned with wings.

"Maybe. Young's standing over there, as a matter of fact. Why?"

Florence shot a look at the group of four men, now walking toward them.

"Answers the description all right!" he nodded. "Listen. If it's the man I'm after—we got a tip—his right name is Beston, and he's an Army officer who flew the coop over a year ago. Not only that but he'd embezzled around sixty thousand dollars as post exchange officer, right after the War, at Rockwell Field, California. I'll talk to him in a minute. If it's the man I'm to put him under arrest and take him back to McCook."

"Listen here!" Groody protested.

He drew the Army man away, and rapidly outlined the situation with respect to Young.

"In that case," Florence said in staccato phrases, "I guess it'll be all right if he's landed in the local hoosegow. Have some qualified officer of the law to do it. God help me if he gets loose, but under the circumstances I'll stay here and see him in jail. Nothing else to do."

He ran over his papers swiftly, meanwhile keeping an eye on Young. That devil-may-care airman was now over by the plane, with the others, inspecting its huge bulk with an interested eye while he explained various features of it to t others.

"I'll have a word or two with him," Florence nodded. "Just to identify m mission, here are the papers and the ord for his arrest. You can help me out wit the local authorities, who may not b familiar with Army procedure. Let's g see him, eh?"

"What a funny break this is, comin right today," grunted Corrigan. "It su makes Young out capable of what w thought he did, doesn't it? And mak this Hinton situation as complicated as letter in Chinese."

Groody nodded. He was watchin Young's face as Florence said crisply:

"Young, I want to see you a moment."

The Army man's right hand was fiddlin with the butt of his gun, as though afrai Young might make a move to escap Young's smile was wiped from his face though by magic, and for a second h seemed to shrink back. Then the smi returned, and he walked forward.

The mechanic climbed down from t plane, and walked toward his chi Groody was watching Young. He an Florence were fifteen feet from t group composed of Musselman, Bullio Farrell and the flyers. Tom Service h his round eyes wide open, and was starin fixedly at the two men. Florence was ta ping one hand with his papers, and talkin fast and furiously.

Suddenly Young whirled to face t group of showmen behind him. In h hand was a gun. At the same instant bo the mechanic and Florence had drawn th automatics and all three Colt's were level at the paralyzed troupers.

"Don't move!" snapped Young, and no his face was alight and his eyes flashin with triumph. "Musselman, come on ov here."

The mechanic handed his gun to You and got into the rear cockpit of the ship.

Groody was next door to a raving mani He, Service and Corrigan were armed, a helpless as so many babies! Taken in li a bunch of half-wits!

"See those machine guns in the rear-co pit—and in the observer's cockpit?" You went on casually. "They mean—do move. The jig is up for my uncle and We've known it for some time. Howev you were so kind as to promise me t this town of Hinton would be the climax, and that we were safe until then. So we figured out this scheme. Good one, don't you think, gentlemen? Much simpler than taking a chance on a bullet, if we tried to beat it away from our guards."

The slender, vibrant young outlaw was smiling that flashing smile, and as he stood there he looked like a healthy, radiant young animal. He glanced about him quickly, as though making sure of the fact that there would be no immediate danger of interference, and then said:

"I'll take up a few minutes of valuable time to make a little speech. I want to thank you, one and all, for an interesting few days. I've had a lot of fun. God, Groody, I've laughed myself sick, tying you in knots!

"All that stuff about vengeance that I talked about—hell, I was trying to make you think I was an outraged martyr! Admit it, now—you thought off and on that maybe I didn't do the things you knew I did, eh? I should have been an actor, no use of talking.

"I'm sort of glad I didn't have to kill you, at that. You're a good guy, Groody. Not bad, anyway. And I've been living for this minute. I hate to go—your face is interesting right now."

He threw back his head and laughed. "If you only knew what you had your hands on!" he chuckled. "Well, good luck, boys. You've got an interesting job ahead of you. I've had so much fun I almost hope you do a good job today—get those goofs, inasmuch as everything's gone to pot anyhow.

"They'll sure love us. But nobody on earth ever did any thinking about me, and so I'm the principal subject of my own thoughts. Now we're going to climb aboard, and take a little trip."

As Young, with the two Colt's, kept the huddled group of showfolk covered, his accomplices climbed into the bomber. Young was smiling and debonair, enjoying himself hugely. Groody, his mind racing, still was aware of the subconscious thought:

"There isn't anybody like that! This is some damn dream!"

The mechanic was in the fuselage cockpit, and the machine gun swung around to cover the raging men who were as helpless as though bound and gagged. Groody's mind was darting from one wild possibility to another, and as Young put away one gun he had decided on an expedient which had one chance in a million of succeeding.

"Well, so long - gentlemen," grinned Young. "The time has come when we must part. Too bad you haven't guns on your ships, Groody. We could have a bit of a scrap, eh? No, I'm not sorry either. I saw you fly combat at Issoudun!"

In a moment he was up in the pilot's cockpit, alongside the jumpy pilot. The two great motors roared into life, and the Martin started its stately way across the field. The man in the rear kept his gun pointed at the motionless group, so that they could not move.

Fifty yards, a hundred, and the Martin was in full career. Not a word had been spoken by the astounded showmen, until Groody leaped into action.

"Crank this plane, Bob! Tom, get the parachute out! They can't hit us for a minute!"

No one but Groody knew his plan, nor did any of the laymen realize how desperately few seconds there were to work in. The Martin was leaving the ground as the flyers leaped into action. It would have to gain at least three hundred feet of altitude before it could bank around safely, and then come back to shoot.

The Jenny, still warm from its recent flight, caught on the first mighty swing of the prop. Groody had snapped the 'chute harness around him in a second. As the Martin started its leisurely bank that rear machine gun began to speak, but the Martin was a long distance away. Groody was in the cockpit. He did not stop to fasten his belt at all, but with one hand on the stick and the other on the throttle he gave the hundred and fifty horsepower Jenny the gun.

He swung it cross-field as it started, getting up speed in the same direction which the bomber had gone on the take-off, and then turning diagonally to avoid getting close to the big ship. It was a desperate chance, for the field was narrow, but a hundred feet from the trees he was off the ground. He held the Jenny down, and one mighty zoom took it over the trees.

The Martin was over the opposite edge of the field, turning after the Jenny. Groody kept straight ahead, a safe distance away, and with his head turned to watch his pursuers he climbed as much as he dared.

The bomber's best speed was a bit less than a hundred miles an hour, he estimated, and it did not maneuver quickly. His ship would climb faster, and was more sensitive to the controls. If they'd just chase him!

They did, for a while, and then turned southward.

"Having no guns, they figure I'm going to follow 'em and see where they go!" Groody told himself. "They've got more gas than I have, of course."

He was not losing a foot, and was climbing faster than they were. They held to their course, now that they were high enough to clear the mountains, and behind them came Groody, a half mile back of them.

What he planned to do caused his mouth to tighten and his lean cheeks to seem a bit pale, but it was not so much because of the personal danger involved. Four men in that ship ahead——

"Two of 'em men who tried to kill me, and would have done it without turning over a hand," he reminded himself to steel his heart against them. "And three or four other dead men on the trail they left, as well."

Three thousand five hundred feet high, he estimated they were, and he was a bit more than four thousand. Down below, the world was one of jagged peaks and deep ravines, solidly wooded. Far to the north was a thriving town; here and there below, concrete roads twisted and turned around the mountain sides, and there were occasional isolated houses.

It was a bleak and perilous panorama for his purposes, but for the moment Groody was as contemptuous of danger, as incapable of fear, as he had been when in the heat of aerial combat before. And always there was that subconscious confidence in himself, almost a contempt for the air.

"That gang plan to hide out somewhere in the mountains for months," Groody soliloquized. "And it'd take the National Guard to find 'em, and not an army would ever take 'em alive, I don't think. Not Young, anyway. Machine guns, ammunition, everything. Many an outlaw has hid in here for life, at that."

Suddenly his narrow, sloping eyes glowed briefly. Five miles ahead there was a little stream winding along, and on its banks were cleared fields and cabins.

His hand found the throttle, and again it went all the way on. The hundred and eighty horsepower Wright motor went into full cry, and slowly the Jenny, nosed down just a trifle, crept forward on its quarry. The squat, four ton Martin was a breathtaking sight in the air, and the tense, coldly furious Groody had never hated to do a thing as he hated what he was about to try now. So much so that his personal safety never entered his head.

He must be careful, now. He was getting close. Soon they'd start shooting, and at the moment he was a helpless target. Seven hundred feet higher than the bomber, he was, and three hundred feet back. He banked and dived and threw his ship around for a moment as the rear machine gun started to speak. Then, with a long breath, the hawk-faced pilot's face became that of a bird of prey, and the stick went all the way forward.

It was almost a straight nose dive. He eased the throttle back as the speed reached two hundred and twenty miles an hour. His motor was his shield against bullets, now, but he had to look out over the side to keep a straight course for his prey. The Jenny was like a dauntless hawk, swooping on an eagle.

His windshield was shot away, his propeller went to splinters. Groody was ready when that happened, and one hand snapped off the motor switch to keep the racing motor from jumping out of the fuselage. The wires were screaming with the speed of that flashing nose dive, and when he poked his head out the side to watch the Martin the airstream tore the breath from his nostrils.

Suddenly the Martin tipped up on one wing. Doubtless they could not realize what that terrific dive meant, knowing that he had no guns. The machine gun bullets were coming like hail, but the motor ahead had deflected them all so far.

One last look over the side—a slight change of course which sent the ship into an absolute nose dive—and the time had come. With a little prayer to the gods of the air he plunged over the side.

He had pulled the ripcord as he leaped, and the 'chute was open in a split second. The Jenny crashed head on into the

Martin. The big bomber had been banking and diving but the pilot had acted too late. The loggy bomber could not answer in time.

The Jenny crashed through the upturned wings, and hung there. Groody, watched with eyes which were somehow brooding and bewildered as the two locked ships spun downward, out of control.

With increasing speed the formerly trim navigators of the air, carrying a cargo of corpses, flashed downward. They fell in a ravine, and, as they hit, a tremendous ball of fire sprang into being. It was as though the ground had opened to give a glimpse into hell. In a moment, as Groody floated downward, the fire had died to an ordinary bonfire.

Suddenly the reaction swept over the lanky flyer. He felt weak and shaken and very tired. It was far from pleasant to have killed four men—even men like Young and Musselman.

"It may be better to pass the whole thing off as an accident," he thought as he floated down over that deadly terrain.

It was no time to be working out problems, however, other than the one presented by landing. He thought he could make one of the fields by slipping his 'chute, and he tried. Five hundred feet above the ground he heard the noise of a motor. It was Corrigan, in the other Jenny, swooping down toward him. Bob circled about him anxiously, and watched the landing.

The breeze was too strong for Groody. It carried him across the hilly, stumpy field, and as he dropped at fifteen feet a second he knew he would hit the trees on the far side of the clearing. Desperately he pulled the corner of his 'chute down, by means of the shroudlines from harness to edges, but it did not work. His body crashed into the upper part of a low, gnarled tree. The parachute caught in the limbs of it as his body bounced from limb to limb, smashing its way through the foliage. The battering scarcely hurt him, for a few seconds, but as he ricocheted off the last limb it got him on the head, somehow.

He was in a daze as he dropped ten feet downward, and when the caught parachute brought him up with a terrific shock it jolted him into unconsciousness.

His feet but a few inches above the ground, hanging there helpless, he thankfully drifted off into something like sleep.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CLEM

HE CAME to, on the ground, and Bob Corrigan was bending over him. "Hello," remarked Groody, aware of a splitting headache. "Landed, eh?"

"Yes, damn it, and ruined a tire and splintered a few spars, struts, braces or something in the left wingtip," grunted Corrigan. "If I'd known you weren't hurt I wouldn't have chanced it. How do you feel?"

"Somebody's soaking me on the head every time my heart beats," returned Groody, "and I'll bet I've got more black and blue spots than the tattooed man has pictures on him. But in general, I'm still together."

"Nothing broken that I could find. That quartette's deceased, I observed as I came on over."

"Let's see to the ship," suggested Groody. "Gosh, we've got to be back at the lot as quick as we can, and a plane might have come in handy."

"I know it. I shouldn't have landed. But I saw you swinging under the tree, and saw you hit, and I figured you might hang there, all broken up, forever, to say nothing of what these mountaineers might do to you. I think we can patch up the ship all right. I hit a stump with the damn thing. If we do, I don't know whether we can get it out of here."

Groody was feeling better every moment. The headache was subsiding rapidly, and a bit of soreness in his limbs didn't amount to much. It had been a miracle, at that, getting out of it so easily.

Back at the ship he proceeded to give it an expert appraisal, slitting the canvas of the left wingtip carefully.

"We can take off the good tire and then get our takeoff on two bare wheels," was his judgment, "and if we can get some thread or twine and cloth we can splint these braces so they'll hold a while, I think."

Luckily, the ash cross-braces which had been cracked were not those carrying the biggest load. Spars and cross-pieces had stood the shock, but many of the smaller braces had splintered. At the extreme tip of the wing the outside brace between the spar of the leading edge and that of the trailing edge would need bandaging, but they could do it, given the materials.

A moment later three mountaineers, with rifles, and several women and children with them who remained in the shelter of the woods, stalked upon the scene with wary dignity. It took ten minutes to get their confidence, but the net result of Groody's persuasive conversation was that one of them made off to procure much thread and considerable cloth. The shy women and children were persuaded from their hiding places, and examined the airplane with awed interest.

By the time the materials were back at the plane an audience of more than fifty souls watched the airmen work with consuming interest.

Groody and Corrigan carefully wrapped each broken piece in cloth, and then wound the joined pieces tightly with thread, twine and safety wire. They had ripped the canvas carefully, in geometric lines, so it could be sewed up again.

And as they worked the conversation played around just one central subject. What had happened in the past didn't matter so much then. Both had difficulty in restraining themselves as the tedious work went on and the sun dropped over the hills.

"Tom's there, of course," Groody said for the hundredth time. "It's a cinch that the first thing that was done was to nab the two fake dicks, who are the only people with the show we had any dope on."

"Maybe they've come through in great style," Corrigan reminded him. "When they were told about Musselman and Young, and all we had on 'em, and Hatwell, and above all that their leaders had planned to run away and leave 'em flat—seems to me they'd talk and talk freely!"

"There's that police chief, too," Groody nodded. "Maybe they got him to say his piece.

"But the question is, Bob—does the clem go on or doesn't it?"

"That," Bob stated judiciously as he wrapped a brace with all the care of a surgeon setting a broken bone, "looks to me like fifty-fifty. How can a gang of hundreds be called off, a gang that was smoked up to a clem for the fun of the thing? These hill billies, miners, and the rest don't know what it's all about. They were ready to take a crack at their old enemy to revenge themselves for past years and just out of deviltry. They wouldn't have an inkling—none but a few ringleaders—that they were being Musselman's tools."

"The more I think of it, the more I think she goes, unless the State troopers and the dicks have done some almighty good work," stated Groody. "Damn this ship! I'd give a year off the hind end of my life to be back there. It'll be hell, I imagine, if it does go on. There's been people killed in clems in Hinton."

"Old man Mettal was explaining this clem business to me a few days ago," Corrigan remarked. "In the old days, of course, a traveling show, carnival, circus, or turkey stage troupe or medicine man, was kind of an enemy going through hostile territory, according to Dad. And they were crude, rough and crooked, and they aimed to take the rubes and take 'em plenty.

"Kind of an acknowledged contest, you know—best man win. And every show had to figure on fighting the roughnecks of about half the towns they played. That went on until just a few years ago, when the circus cleaned up, and even some carnivals. But a hell of a lot of towns and people sort of had a tradition about circus day. That was a day to get drunk, raise hell, and put something over on the show that took a lot of money out of town and cheated on the sideshow and all the rest of it."

"Well, college towns, too," Groody pointed out as he took an anxious glance at the reddening west. "I guess ten years ago any show went into any college town with guns in each pocket, clubs in each hand——"

"And a knife in each mouth," grinned Corrigan. "Right you are. And Dad says there are still sections—mountain towns right in this district, and down through Tennessee and Kentucky and the Carolinas—where there's a recognized feud with any circus. And in so many cases these tough showmen just ruined the townspeople that it's rankled ever since."

"A lot of 'em, I guess, are just raising hell kind of good-naturedly," opined Groody. "But some of 'em, I hear, are honest-to-God battles. I've heard of 'em using elephants to charge a mob, and all that stuff."

"Sure, 'specially in the old days. Well, George, think these'll hold? We've got to sew up the linen now, if she's O.K."

"It'll get us back to the lot, anyway," Groody estimated. "Let's start on this canvas."

Less than a half hour of daylight remained when, with wheels which were without tires and a left wing which showed many signs of an operation, the ship was ready to go. The motor was running on the warmup, Groody at the throttle, and Corrigan was thanking the mountain people who had loaned them the materials. He was also presenting them with money.

Satisfied with the performance of the eight cylinder motor, Groody got out and surveyed a path through the several stumps which decorated the field.

"A snake would tie himself in knots trying to follow our trail," he soliloquized, "but I guess it can be done."

It could, by a Groody. He missed two stumps by a hair, and half way across the field had to twist his ship off at an angle, but with the undercarriage scraping the trees, and the left wing tip bending and curling fluently, they got off, circling between dangerously close mountainsides for altitude. Finally he sent the ship across the mountains under a darkening sky in which a pale moon was already riding high.

IN A few moments the lighted circus lot came in sight. The midway held quite a number of people, although the performance was three quarters of an hour away. And from his lofty height he could see hundreds of glowing-eyed vehicles converging on the lot. The flares and electric lights of the lot were ablaze.

"No clem—yet, anyway!" thought Groody. "If they've stalled it off——"

A hand was gripping his shoulder, and as he turned to look at Corrigan the big flyer pointed downward. Groody threw the ship into a bank, stealing an appraising glance at the left wingtip as he did so, and then examined the ground.

His face hardened as he took the scene in. Vague in the half twilight, the spectacle was unmistakable. There were at least three or four hundred men on the fringe of the woods. There was an open space of three hundred yards or more between the forest, at that point, and the wall around the back yard.

"An army, by God, and they're going to charge the show from the rear and sweep on through!" he thought. "Right now, I wonder? During the show? Probably—and it'll be hell!"

In a second he had cut off the motor and was yelling back to Corrigan.

"Got a pencil and paper?" he shouted. "Write a note—this mob'll take 'em by surprise—from the rear! We'd better stay in the air. Maybe we can stall 'em off and have the fight right out here, anyway!"

Corrigan nodded, and his head bent as he wrote a brief note of warning. Groody was circling over the midway now, spiraling down, as every face lifted to watch him. Corrigan was ready, note wrapped around a socket wrench from the tool kit, as Groody swooped low, pulled up in a partial stall over the marquee entrance to the big top, and then went into a vertical sideslip. He sent the ship almost directly downward, holding full right rudder with the stick all the way over to the left. And Corrigan's shot was almost perfect. It fell a few feet in front of the marquee, and they saw Jack Farrell himself pick it up.

Skimming the poles of the big top, Groody sent the Jenny roaring toward the woods.

"Haven't got the guts to spread out in little groups and attack from all sides," he ruminated swiftly. "They can be plenty brave with a few hundred friends around 'em—like all mobs. Put 'em in six man bunches, and four of these circus guys with a stake apiece would pound 'em into jelly and have 'em on the run."

He peered ahead. There was a wan light diffused from the circus illumination, and the moon was aiding, too. A hot curse dropped from his lips.

"Me circling over 'em scared 'em into action right now!" he thought. "Maybe they planned it now anyway—but they're on their way!"

And they were. A tidal wave of men was pouring out over the open field, on a front a hundred feet wide. There must be four or five hundred of them, Groody estimated swiftly, and they all had weapons.

They'd crash through the back yard, right into the big top, and before the circus people could organize, their work would be done. Who'd ever think they'd attack in force like, and from the rear? They were an army!

"And been well coached, too! God, we must hold 'em a few minutes!

He glanced behind him, at the show, as he sent his ship into a terrific dive. He could see hundreds of running figures, back on the lot. He knew that every reliable man was waiting for a clem. But this plan of campaign might throw them completely off kilter. If the State troopers were there it would help considerably.

Now he was scraping the ground, flashing straight for the oncoming hosts.

And they broke. Men tumbled over each other to get out of the way as that flailing propeller and the bellowing plane hurtled toward them on business bent.

As Groody swept through the lane opened for him he saw that he had halted the advance for the moment. Men were scrambling to their feet, and the confused mob was converted into a mass of running men who spread like water over the field.

Groody had forgotten his crippled wing as he wing-turned, and came swooping back. He saw the elephants come out of the menagerie, on the run, and line up in front of the back yard wall. There were men on horses, too. The back yard was a swirling maelstrom of men and animals.

He had to turn again, now, and once more he went roaring for the mob. Evidently they had no doubt that he would plow through them, if necessary. They broke while he was still a hundred yards from them, but they couldn't maneuver that easily against him. He switched his course slightly, toward the right of the lane they'd opened, and that side turned into a mass of prone men as he swept across them.

"And the left flank slowed up—scared if a man is lost to 'em!" spat Groody! "Nobody in that gang wants to be first up to the line of battle!"

The whole advance had been slowed, it seemed, and it took a half minute to get it under way again. There was no more time, nor space, for Groody to do more. He flashed back over them as the mob was covering the last hundred yards between themselves and the back yard.

AND THE hasty defences of the show were ready. The eighteen elephants were backed up to the sidewall of the back yard. Ahead of them were a hundred men, and more were coming every minute. In the front rank were about twenty horsemen, and now they swung into action.

All men were astride big grays, the magnificent baggage stock of the show. They were riding bareback, it seemed, and each man was armed with a heavy stake as they sent their horses on the dead gallop for the oncoming mob of men. The searchlights of the lightwagons were on now, and Groody was flying in their illumination.

The horsemen hit the mob like so many thunderbolts. Laying about them lustily they went through the crowd like knives through butter, and for a second the enemy was disorganized, and many went down.

The lot was a maelstrom now, and it looked as though every last man, from Bronk O'Donnelly to the albino, was either on the job or rushing like mad to be there. The band rushed out of the big top, hurling their uniforms off as they ran.

Then Groody gave a whoop of joy. Careless of everything else, he circled and watched.

Fifty yards behind the twenty individual horsemen came two, on horses running parallel to each other, more than a hundred feet apart. Between the two saddles was a rope, stretched tightly. And in the bright light of searchlights, show lights and moon, Groody was sure he recognized Jack Farrell and Bronk O'Donnelly as the horsemen. Twenty-five yards behind them came two more—Bullion and young Jack Moorehead, and they had a rope too.

Bringing up the rear was an army the like of which has never been gathered on land or sea. Negroes, made up as wild-wigged and much bedizened Zulus, ran alongside riders in tights, many men with crowns on their heads, and ragged canvasmen. But all were armed with something, and all were eager for the fray.

The first horsemen were through the ranks of the enemy as Bronk O'Donnelly and Jack Farrell hit them. Standing in their stirrups, they sent man after man to the ground while the rope dragged others to earth and piled up the advancing representatives of Hinton. Bullion and Moorehead swung to the left, Bullion riding hard in a semi-circle, and they hit the mob from the side. The twenty original riders, now reduced to about fifteen, were charging from the rear.

And then the paralyzed mass of men was hit by the circus infantry. From all sides a wave of men, brandishing stakes with deadly effect, poured through the disorganized ranks of the enemy. Every circus man got three or four dazed Hintonites before they could get to their feet, and the horsemen in the middle of the crowd were laying about them merrily.

Groody's narrowed eyes were dancing with a light which hadn't been in them for years, and he was cheering the showmen on with raucous whoops which he couldn't hear himself. Corrigan was standing up, grinning blissfully.

Suddenly Groody came to himself. The mob was in full retreat, now, for the woods. The circus women were huddled in the backyard, but the midway was deserted. Four or five thousand people had poured over the lot to see the fight.

"If they'd had guts a few men by themselves could do anything from set the show afire to cut every rope on the lot," Groody told himself. "Mob men are rats at heart, every damn one of 'em."

Flying low, he covered the lot, his eyes straining to see any evidence of sabotage. There wasn't a soul to be seen, from midway to horse tents, except scattered circus men on guard.

The street in front of the lot, packed with cars, was deserted except for some who had been held up in traffic and had got out of their cars to see what was up. Not a sign of any dirty work.

He stiffened as a big car came rocking across the lot, toward the midway. It drew up behind the main ticket wagon. Eight men poured out of it, and swarmed into the wagon. The next second a limp body was hurled from it—then another.

"They're robbing the ticket wagon! Ten thousand dollars at least; maybe more!" he yelled to Corrigan, and the next moment he was sure. For four of the men emerging in haste from the ornate white and gold wagon were carrying the small safe, unopened, and loading it in the car.

It was off in a second, rocking across the front part of the lot, behind the crowd which was still watching the fight.

Groody had a gun, so did Corrigan. In a split second he'd made up his mind. The fleeing motor was circling back to get on the road beyond the thick traffic, rocking along at desperate speed. If those men could be got it would mean more than bagging robbers, he was sure.

Now he was behind the car, diving at a speed which made the ship quiver. He did not notice the trembling, curling left wingtip as he got his Colt's out.

He was ten feet to the left of the automobile, now, and going in the same direction. Close ahead loomed the fringe of the forest, but he did not notice that as he took a careful bead and fired all six shots. And, they were hits, too.

As he zoomed upward Corrigan was emptying his gun. The car was driverless, now. It was speeding in a circle.

It turned over. It did a somersault and a twist at once as the front wheels crashed into a rock. Two bodies flew from it in the air; people were running toward the scene.

And his left wing snapped at the tip. The right wing darted upward as the unequal air pressure tipped the ship. In a second Groody had acted. Right rudder all the way on, stick over to the left, he slipped down for a moment. Then he leveled off as much as he could. In a forward sideslip he went for the ground.

The trees were close ahead. A crash head on, or drive a wing into the ground? The latter seemed best. He threw the right wing high once more, jammed the rudder all the way on again, and as the left wing drove in a splintering, tearing mass into the ground he shoved the stick forward a bit to hit the ground before Corrigan, in the back seat, did.

The ship went on its back as the combined noises of tearing linen and splintering wood and clanging metal filled the air. His head hit the ground, and once again he drifted into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XXVI

A MINOR DETAIL

WHEN Groody came to he bent his eyes upon a very puzzling world, for the moment. The sun was shining, for one thing, so it was next day, and he felt curiously calm and nerveless.

"Must have doped me," he thought to himself. "Well, let's see what happened."

With divers movements and inspections he proceeded to take account of his injuries.

"Some broken ribs, an ankle that might be either sprained or broken, and the cuticle broken on the conk," he decided. "If the number of bandages they've got on my head is an indication, I plowed up the ground with it. Not bad, I guess, from the way I feel."

Ten minutes later a bearded man in a white coat beamed on him sunnily, and informed him that he was in a semi-hospital maintained for hurt miners, and that he, in person was the doctor.

"You'll be all right in a few days," he assured Groody. "There's a Mr. Service wants to see you outside."

"Send him in," Groody directed, and a moment after the doctor had gone out Mr. Thomas Service entered, beaming warmly at his friend, and then polishing his eyeglasses.

"Hell of a guy you are, losing us two weeks work!" Tom chided him, to which Groody responded:

"Aren't we out of a job?"

"Hell, no! We're hired by old man James, in person, at five thousand a week for the balance of the season, if you want to continue walking on the wings of the wind."

"How's Bob?"

"Never got a scratch, and pulled you out before the ship got afire. You sure saved the show's bacon by spotting that mob before it started. We won in a walk, and the show went on complete, only fifteen minutes late. And those ginks who robbed the ticket wagon admitted they were a gang following the show, under the direction of a guy in Chicago whom we've got in jail now, and whom I know is one of those carnival guys I found out about while I was there."

"Well, go ahead. How about the corpse of Hatwell, and——"

"Well, the idea's this. We nabbed those two fake dicks right after Musselman and Young hopped off, and after a couple of hours they shot their wad, which was about as we figured. I'll tell you more about that later.

"The chief of police wouldn't come through, and I guess he didn't do any more than crooked policemen used to be bribed to do in the old days—wink at illegal gambling and dirty shows. Anyhow, we couldn't stop the clem. It was too much of a local affair and the boys were all hopped up about it. Old feud stuff, and they didn't know or give a damn about Musselman.

"With what the dicks said, and everything, we just laid the whole deal right before the State police, from A to Izzard. Your stuff on that knocking off of four men—while known to be what it was, unofficially, the boys will call an accident if you're willing. I suppose you are. Bronk O'Donnelly had to put up bail on Hatwell, but with your evidence, prime proof from Hatwell's friends in the profession that he was a crook and a bum and a murderer, Bronk'll just stray back to court some afternoon and be dismissed.

"About the two detectives. We were right on every account, of course, and they didn't hold back anything except to blame all those murdered canvasmen on Hatwell, which is natural. They were evidently men who stumbled on some information, and were knocked off in self-defense. The dicks did most of the sabotage themselves, helped by one animal man—the Ransford guy you got—and two supposed property men. Boy, there's some tough babies in this business!

"The detective agency is on the trail of the lawyer who followed up the damage suits, and in Chi, three carnival men are under arrest for conspiracy right now. Old man James is right up on his ear, and having the time of his Irish life, I believe, even if it has and will cost him more than a hundred thousand, at the very least, no matter how the damage suits are arranged. And the dope is that after we get this lawyer cornered and go to work we can lop that stuff off considerably."

"How the hell did a Martin bomber ever come——"

"Wasn't that keen? Well, Florence was a civilian test pilot at McCook. Hell of a good flyer and engineer, but crooked. Seems he and Young have been together in past years on some brand of criminality or other. Nobody can tell, but he must have been offered ten thousand or so to pull the stunt. They're all dead that might know, so we've just got to deduce that. Anyhow, he took the Martin for a supposed flight to New York which he'd asked for—supposed to deliver the ship to Mitchell Field—and just swung off and pulled the job. Doubtless they expected to get a chance to hop off without the gun play, and maybe Florence figured on a yarn to the effect that he was forced at the point of a gun to fly Young and Musselman away."

"Who'd have thought Young would have stuck to his uncle when he had a chance to save his own hide? A mysterious lad, Young, very mysterious."

Tom nodded.

"And Musselman, too—one for the book. One of the Chi detectives I hired says that from the description he thinks Young is the bird they call Smiling Billy Craig, a goodlooking devil who walked into the gang world of Chicago three years ago and got to be the toughest, nerviest gunman in it; got to lead a gang, and made money hand over fist and spent it the same way. We can't be sure yet, but that's probably who it is.

"A queer specimen, but Lord, what nerve! The space usually occupied by a heart and a conscience are all nerve—were I mean—in him, and I guess he was loyal according to his lights and enjoyed life, at that.

"As for Musselman, he was going to let this staged clem go through as scheduled, although skipping himself, just as a final blow to the show and the man he hated, meaning James. The thought had as much to do as anything, I think, with those assistants of his opening their mouths and telling all, as the headlines say. We didn't let any of 'em know that Musselman and Young had both gone to their eternal roast, and these bozoes fairly fell over themselves to land Musselman in jail for life, at least."

"How about that bloke I parked in Ralston?" inquired Groody, smoking with soulful satisfaction.

"He's still undecided whether to live or die, but he was a canvasman, supposedly, and really an old-time animal man, as I said. Musselman and these ex-carnival crooks just gathered together the cream of the thugs, grifters and bums they'd met during twenty years in the outdoor show business."

"Musselman," mused Groody, "sure started something. I can't quite imagine all this trouble and all——"

"James finally came through," Tom interrupted, his chunky body relaxed in his chair. "This Musselman was a hot tempered, hardboiled egg, but smart. He married James' daughter for money, doubtless. After she died, James sort of suspicioned that Musselman hadn't treated her any too well. James himself is sort of like Bronk O'Donnelly—same type. When he gets started he's a terror. He and Musselman fought like hell, and Musselman's final blow came when he figured his father-in-law, whom he didn't like anyway, was going to cut him out of his will. And James admits he rode Musselman hard. Anyhow, Musselman started in to do a lot of things. Which James has just found out. Embezzlement, and this show thing, partly for money and partly from hatred. These ex-carnival shysters—they're capable of anything. James, you understand, fought like hell with Musselman, but considered him honest and one of the smartest showmen in America.

"And, as in a lot of situations of this kind, it got a hell of a sight bigger than Musselman had planned—ran away with him. After you commit one crime you're liable to do a dozen jobs to save yourself. Stealing a pair of pants has resulted in murder many a time, my boy, many a time."

"So they say," granted Groody. "And we keep on with the show, eh?"

"Right. We get paid what Musselman promised us, up to and including yesterday. Corrigan's ahead with the show in the plane, dropping dodgers and all that. They're in Charleston today. When you get well, we get five thousand a week, cash, for the season."

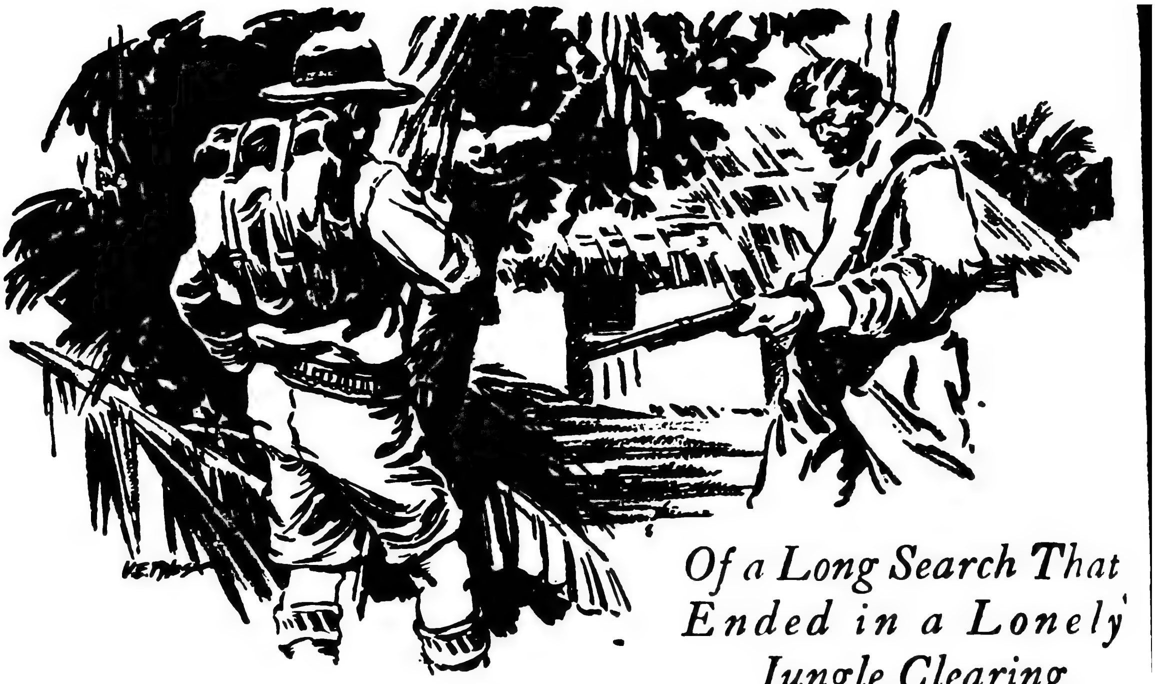
"Which means that the gold will flow to Texas like water," grinned Groody. "You're positive we're set?"

"Contract, my boy, contract! Why, we're the fairhaired boys of the show business right now. You're chief, and Bob and I your retainers. You did a damn fine job, at that, George. I hope life doesn't get monotonous for you now."

"I'll have some fun, making sure I keep whole to make some money. We're O. K. in Texas if I keep from breaking my neck, eh?"

"That's a minor detail," Tom told him, which was a form of badinage he had learned through being around flyers.

THE END



Of a Long Search That Ended in a Lonely Jungle Clearing

GUINEA GOLD

By EVAN ANGLESEA

KENT halted abruptly. He was pushing his way through trackless jungle; yet here was a track. It led straight down to the edge of the river whose thundering rush he had been hearing for hours, whose mists he could just see rising at the end of this unexpected path.

The trail wasn't an animal run. The thick bush had been hacked away to the bare width of a man's body. In the fading afternoon light Kent stooped to scrutinize the rotting, slimy leaf mould.

Boot marks. He knew of only one other white man who might be in the Sneew Mountain Range of Dutch New Guinea prospecting for gold. That was the man he was looking for. A cold gleam came into Kent's eyes as he loosened the gun in the holster on his hip and turned silently and swiftly down the track to the river.

There was more of the look of the sea than of the jungle about this man Kent. His hard jaw was burned to weathered oak; his big straight mouth looked as if it were used to biting off brief orders. His blue-gray eyes had the concentrated gaze of those accustomed to far horizons, yet trained to take in immediate detail.

His body, long and close knit, moved with a loose swing as he slipped noiselessly through the tangle of rank poisonous green that pressed against him at each side of the path. A bullet, a spear, even a knife could easily have struck him from the thick bush. Watchfully alert for just such an attack, he came out warily where the narrow slit in the jungle broke off at the river bank.

The camp he had expected to steal up on was not there. Nothing but the rushing water almost flush with the sharply shelving bank, framed in a gap of the crowding jungle green.

"A big river—in flood," Kent's eyes explored the tumultuous, foam flecked expanse, "and not marked on the map. Nothing much is mapped up here. No way out down that stream. It couldn't be navigated."

Wide and deep, the swirling pea green water seethed uneasily between jagged black volcanic rocks that thrust fanglike above the surface. Slowly curling eddies, smooth and strong as serpents, showed where other rocks lurked beneath the water. The thunderous noise told Kent that somewhere downstream was a fall; a big one. A treacherous river even to cross.

Yet it had been crossed. Upstream, under the overhanging mask of jungle growth that swept the edge of the water, Kent caught sight of the end of a canoe; a native dugout. It bobbed and swayed in the current. The hidden end must be moored to the bank. Someone had used the boat. Native or white? It was his job to find out.

He dropped to hands and knees in the uninviting jungle muck and crawled under the dark curtain of tangled vines along the bank. Half a dozen yards, and he came on a tiny cleared space perhaps three yards square. Just visible in the bush twilight, the hidden end of the canoe was lashed to a stake driven deep in the bank.

Still hidden, Kent listened. No sound came to him but the deep roar of the river, the nearer chuckle and gurgle of the water sucking along the bank. He rose and crossed to the stake and bent to look at the painter that held the dugout against the strong pull of the current.

"White man's rope—and a sailor's knot. This begins to look like the lad . . ."

He stooped closer to the rope. Through the hemp ran a darker thread. Kent pulled a tin canister from his pocket, unscrewed the cap and shook out a match. By its flame he saw that the dark thread running through the rope was red.

"English Navy rope. Our rope—nobody could buy it; and the man who stole it isn't far off. I've got him!" He straightened his flat back, easing the heavy pack as if he were throwing off a burden long borne. "Outside these broad hints, nothing."

Nothing. He looked around the clearing sharply. His eyes had grown accustomed to the greenish bush dusk, but they discovered no other trace of the human being who would probably very soon be his only white fellow in several hundred square miles of the biggest island in the world. Nothing? Kent sniffed.

A little puff of sickening reek came faintly to his nostrils. His hard leather brown face stiffened. He recognized the rank, hot smell. Like a hound he stood alert, head up, keen nose sniffing.

"Good God! He's dead!" he muttered. "Unburied. . . ."

He moved swiftly across the clearing toward the spot from which the nauseous scent came. The jungle wall seemed thinner. Pushing aside the matted growth he was about to crawl through when he stopped suddenly. His eyes narrowed, straining to pierce the twilight, unbelieving. Gradually what he saw there took form unmistakably.

Against the trunks of three great jungle trees three figures were firmly lashed, spread-eagled. Mops of thick, woolly black hair puffed round their drooping skulls. White skeleton bones gleamed here and there; and over the rest of those hanging bodies swarmed and clicked millions of black ants that seemed to give the figures a vibrating, quivering life, a movement. . . .

Kent dropped the curtain of vines quickly, and sat back on his heels. Death he was used to; he had seen savages inflict torture. But the twists of liana vines round those sagging figures were not the work of blacks. They were seaman's hitches, cleverly knotted by rope wise hands.

"The dog!" he cursed softly. "The dirty white savage! To do *that* to human beings—white man's rope is too good to hang him!"

His scarred face knotted into hard bitten lines etched in acid. As he pushed the sun helmet back from his cropped head, what light there was fell on his square jaw with its cleft chin, his tight lipped mouth. His prominent nose had been broken in some long forgotten fight. That thin, humped nose gave Kent's face the stern harshness of a judge pronouncing sentence on a man tried and condemned.

He shook his head abruptly. Crossing the clearing he pulled the moored boat ashore and stepped into it. His knife made short work of hacking through the thin wood of the dugout. He jumped to the bank and stood grimly watching the frail craft fill and sink.

"There. Now get away from me, Mr. Murderer," he muttered as he turned back to the jungle. "There are just two ends to this trail. At one of them this—horror—and at the other—you."

SCOUTING cautiously, Kent padded back up the slippery path. The rotting leaves slid slimily underfoot, squashing into the fetid red ooze. The trail began to climb sharply, and here the way was barred every few yards by fallen tree trunks; waist high barriers buried under the creeping growth of writhing plant life that swarmed over them. Twisting roots masked by the treacherous, gummy clay caught at Kent's feet. Concealed rocks thrust out sharp spikes to trip him as he climbed.

No air but the rank exhalations of the jungle penetrated through the towering masses of vegetation that buried him. The cumulative heat that comes only under the equatorial sun pressed down like a stifling blanket, and Kent's shirt dripped with the rain of sweat that ran from his body. For two hours he struggled upward doggedly, noiselessly, listening as he went. Suddenly something brought him up standing.

The rasp and clang of a shovel struck harshly through the motionless air. Creeping ahead, Kent neared the sound. The boom of a voice became audible. Light striking down from above on the path ahead told him that he was approaching a clearing. As he crawled into the undergrowth at the edge of the open space, the voice came to him clearly.

"'Gold,' I tell 'em—'bags full of it!'" the voice declaimed hoarsely. "'Where'd I get it?' . . . 'Guinea!' I'll say. 'The Dutch Guinea gold hills, where you ain't any of you got the guts to go. But I got it—got all there was there!' I'll tell 'em. 'And I got it in the bank in my own name! Big Bull Dawson,' I'll say, 'that's me!'

"Or maybe I won't tell 'em that. Maybe I'll tell 'em another name——"

It was a monologue, Kent realized as he listened tensely. The speaker was alone. In the gloating voice there was that complete letting go of all restraint that comes when a man speaks for no ears but his own. Bull Dawson was rehearsing a dramatic scene of which he was the hero.

"'Me, a dirty deck swabber?' I'll say. 'Not me! I'm rich! You go to hell! Why I can buy and sell you, and the half of Sydney, too, you blighter . . . .'"

Only obscene profanity could express Dawson's contempt for his nonexistent hearers.

"'Why,' I'll say, 'damn you, I wasn't good enough for you to kick out of your dirty dumps of bars, when I was down here broke and on the beach, hiding away! And now I'm rollin', just wallerin' in it! And I got a swell wife—white! None of your dirty yallers—a lady! And the gold's all mine, 'cause my partner's dead and buried up there in them stinkin', bush rotten hills. . . .'

"No. Guess I won't say that. Leave that out. He ain't dead—yet. But he's as good as. I'll bury him, all right. Then I'll marry the girl—if I fancy marryin'. Maybe it'd take the big ideas out of her if I . . . ."

Kent had crept to the very edge of his cover. He crouched with every muscle taut for a spring, his fingers tingling as they curled into talons. As he parted the tangle of bush and looked through, his hand hovered over the gun butt at his hip.

He saw a squat, big barreled man clad only in a cinglet and a pair of dirty white shorts. The man's hairy torso and arms were banded with heavy muscles.

He stood leaning on his shovel, leering complacently at the ugly thoughts going on behind his reddened little eyes. If ever a beast demanded shooting down from cover, this man did. Kent felt the hair rising along the back of his neck. But he could not shoot. He turned and slipped back the way he had come.

"Cooee! Camp ahead!" Kent shouted, climbing noisily back up the path. "Anybody there? Cooee!"

As he broke into the clearing, he faced a leveled shotgun sawed off short. Burly and scowling, Dawson crouched behind a boulder at the far edge of the clearing.

In the center of the open space, at the base of an outcropping of rock, the pick and shovel lay abandoned at the mouth of a deep pit. A stream of steaming water from some hot spring ran across the clearing.

"Hello! Who do you think you're aiming at?" Kent asked, advancing casually but steadily. "Expecting to welcome someone you don't like with that thing?"

"Welcome nobody!" Dawson growled. "Stand back there! You alone? Who are you?"

"Nobody—that's me. And I am alone. So I take it I'm welcome. Oh, put up your gun, man. Don't stand there like a petrified sentry. The war's over. Hadn't you heard?"

Kent stopped to light a cigaret. Seeing both the stranger's hands occupied, Dawson came grudgingly from behind his rock, lowering the muzzle of the gun. In apparent abstraction Kent watched the rolling gait out of the corner of his eye.

"That's better," he said, puffing his smoke indifferently. "Now we can tell each other all about ourselves. Lonesome country this, isn't it? My name's—well, never mind. If you ever heard it, you'd know I prefer a country that's—lonesome."

Kent's idle, rather vague manner brought a look of contempt into Dawson's suspicious eyes.

"Meaning—you're wanted?" he asked sneeringly. "That's why you come into this stinking, God-forsaken country? What you wanted for? What'd you do?"

Kent's eyes narrowed till they looked sleepy.

"Oh, a couple of things—or more," he said evasively. "A fellow said there was gold up here—a lot of it. But that would be a hundred miles or so further on. D'you think there's gold?"

"Might be. None here," Dawson grunted. "I been digging round; got nothing. You're just going through, then?"

"Going through tomorrow," Kent nodded, "if you don't mind my camping round here."

"Sure." Dawson's nod was ungracious. He happened not to want strangers. Still, the fellow was stuck there for the night, and the soft headed dude would have to be told some tale that sounded reasonable about the camp.

"I'm prospecting, too," Dawson explained. "I come up here with a partner name of Reed, and he brought along a fool girl—sister of his that would come. Then Reed he got sick, and me, I'm taking the pair of them back down along, gentle. I oughta left 'em to go out alone, and gone on after that gold you tell about myself. But that's the way I am—tender hearted. I can't go back on a pal."

"H'm—that's fine!" Kent drawled, his face expressionless. "Fine of you, I mean. Rotten luck, though. What's the matter with Reed? I've got some medicines, if they'd be any help. . . ."

"They wouldn't," Dawson said hastily. "I mean he ain't sick. He's queer. In the head. But anyway, come along up to camp."

His greedy little eyes had gone over Kent in detail. The pack on the stranger's back looked well stocked, and a suspicious bulge round his slim middle suggested a money belt to Dawson. He led the way up the steaming creek, talking with a pretense of gruff cordiality.

"Good to see a white man in this blarsted country," he grunted. "Though there ain't any reason they should come here. Gold? That's all in me eye round these parts. There's every kind of mud and clay and rocks and dirt mixed up here—every kind but pay dirt. It ain't natural country, that's what I say. Who ever found gold where there's jungle?"

"They've found it lots of places in New Guinea," Kent observed. "But they won't find it here, eh?"

"I b'lieve you, they won't find it here," Dawson guffawed. "I got all there—I mean I dug all the likely places, and gaw'-blimy, I'm through! I'm going out, I am! Here's camp!"

TWO mud-and-wattle huts raised on heaps of stones stood on the bank of the stream. They had pushed the jungle back a few feet, but the overwhelming bush seemed to be pressing in on the flimsy human structures as if to crush them with its violent, malignant vitality. As Kent looked the huts blotted out, so swiftly the tropic dark rushed down. Dawson grunted his disgust.

"Hi! Strike a light up there!" he shouted. "Come on! Get on with it! I'm here!"

A match spurted, and in a moment the steady glow of a lantern showed through the doorless opening of the larger hut. Held high, the lantern moved into sight, and a broad lane of light streamed down across the darkness. Dawson led the way up that gilded path. Kent stumbled after, his eyes riveted on the picture framed in the black doorway.

A shower of golden light fell on the slender head and shoulders of a girl. Under that luminous shower, a bright glint touched her bronze hair, a broad brow, the arch of a fine nose, and a firm chin. But there were dark shadows round the big, steady eyes staring down toward

Bull Dawson, and the expression of the girl's mouth showed the forced calm of desperation.

"Comp'ny!" Dawson shouted. "Stranger going through—stopping just for the night!"

Kent saw a momentary flash of relief in the girl's face, instantly followed by a new fear as to who the stranger might be, suggested by Dawson's unwontedly jovial tone. She stepped out into the veranda, throwing the light on Kent as he approached. He took off his helmet, baring his cropped head to view.

"I hope I'm not putting you out," he said in his clear, quiet voice. His frank, straightforward smile revealed strong white teeth as his blue-gray eyes met the girl's reassuringly. Her tense poise relaxed.

"You are very welcome," she said simply. The sudden hope in her tone told Kent how deeply she meant it. Ignoring Dawson, she led the way into the hut and set the lantern down on a rough box table.

Kent scrutinized the room. Except for such furniture as a few packing cases afforded, the hut was bare. Two bunks were built against the wall. The table was already spread with a primitive meal that had necessarily come out of tins. A harsh, rough background, Kent thought, for the girl with the brave mouth and the fear haunted eyes. An unfamiliar, new sort of anger bristled up in him.

"Will you sit down?" she invited. "We've only boxes. And please help yourself—you must be hungry. I'll call Paul. He's in my sleeping hut."

Kent unslung his heavy pack and laid it in a corner. Bull Dawson drew his box near the table and began shoveling food from his heaped plate into his loose mouth. The girl went to the door, called softly and stood waiting. Footsteps sounded, and the man she had called Paul came into the room.

Dawson's partner was tall, gaunt and hollow cheeked, with a moody face and brooding eyes. Reed was surprisingly like his sister; but his face was worn and lined, though he could not have been much older than she. His manner was nervously morose. He barely nodded to Kent as he took his place at the table and began to eat silently. The girl, too, sat down. In response to her gesture Kent took a box, and she set his plate before him.

IT WAS a strange meal. Kent filled the silences with attempts at commonplace conversation which the girl answered in faint monosyllables, the others not at all. Bull Dawson ate with greedy enjoyment, Paul Reed, with barely concealed distaste. Neither looked at the other, nor at Kent. But he met the girl's big eyes more than once, and thought he read in them a wordless appeal.

She wanted to speak to him, that was plain, and dared not with the others present. The meal finished, Reed left the table at once and went back to the other hut. Bull Dawson leaned back and crammed a sailor's cutty pipe with foul smelling tobacco. The girl went about clearing the table uncertainly, followed everywhere by the sailor's greedy little eyes. Kent sensed her uneasy suspense.

"Oh!" she looked suddenly straight at him. "Would you be kind enough to get me a pail of water from the stream? It's so dark down there, I——"

"Here! I'm your man for that, young lady!" Bull Dawson jumped up hastily, leering at her. "Why didn't you say you wanted water? I'd 'a' got it for you. This here feller's tired. Wants to turn in. Gimme that bucket, Alice!"

The girl's lips tightened at his familiar use of her name. But she handed Bull the bucket without looking at him, and he stumped off toward the creek. She waited while his footsteps died away. Then she spoke quickly.

"Listen," she whispered almost hysterically, "you're a stranger—but—I need help! We need help! That man——"

"I know. Stop that!" Kent's voice was stern as he laid a steadying hand on her arm. She caught back her self-control with a little gasp.

"Thank you. You are right," she said, "I mustn't let go of my nerves. But if you knew what it meant to have any hope of help! Tell me, what is it you know?"

"That this man Dawson is a dangerous savage. Now tell me: Is there much gold in these huts?"

Her eyes flickered toward him in momentary question. Before Kent's unwavering blue-gray look the doubt died out of her face.

"Yes, there is—in my hut," she said swiftly. "That's what makes me afraid. We came up here on Paul's account. He's ays had a craving for adventure. We're land born. Father was a district commissioner in the Solomons. But Paul is the family I've got left now—and so came with him. We're twins."

"Twins? But surely he's older than u!"

She shook her head.

"Shell-shock," she explained hurriedly. He ran away at sixteen to get into the ir Force. He looks older because he's l. That is, he's perfectly well for a long me, then suddenly these fits of depression me.

"He discovered a big pocket of gold ere, and I was so happy, because somehow seemed to cure all Paul's nervous trouble. hen this Bull Dawson came along. Two ays later our three native boys disapeared—never came back. Paul went all pieces again. Foolishly, he hired this an to dig for him. It was a mad thing do, because Bull knows how much gold here is. Now I'm terrified that he'll——"

"Ssh!"

The heavy stamp of Dawson's feet could e heard stumbling up the path. Kent umped across the room, ripped the blan-ets from his pack and threw himself on the oor by the wall, pulling the covers over is face. He heard the girl slip out into he little kitchen shed at the back; heard er moving the tin plates about out here.

"Huh!" Dawson chuckled scornfully as e stepped into the hut. "Asleep already, e sap-headed new chum! Hope he sleeps od. He better. . . ."

Kent heard him take the water out to lice Reed. Evidently Bull's highly elated ood of the afternoon had been awakened gain by his gallantry to the lady on whom is covetous eyes were set. Kent's hands lenched at the rough compliment Bull aid the girl as he set down the bucket.

She did not answer. From under his lanket Kent saw her walk swiftly out of e hut. A moment later Paul Reed's ll, thin figure appeared in the doorway.

"Where's Alice gone?" Bull demanded solently. "What's the matter with her?"

"She's gone to bed," Reed answered. ent stiffened at the ring in his nervously aking voice. "And the matter is this: you ever call my sister Alice again, or noy her by speaking to her at all, I'll nash that thick head of yours down level with your shoulders, Bull or no Bull. Get that?"

"Aw, boy, don't get sore!" Bull said soothingly, though there was an open sneer in his tone. "Since when's you folks too damn good to associate with me? You can't blame a reg'lar man for admirin' a damn pretty young lady like Al——"

"Shut up!" Reed barked, his voice breaking shrilly. "I told you from the first that if you brought her into it I'd kick you out and take the consequences! Tomorrow you're paid off—understand? You'll get out of this camp!"

Kent expected things to break then. He lay, with muscles tensed to jump. To his surprise, Bull Dawson laughed—a great guffaw. He heard Bull pull off his boots and roll into one of the bunks without another word.

Paul Reed threw himself into the other bunk, and the sullen silence of the whispering jungle night closed down. The lantern was left burning.

AWAKE and watchful, Kent lay there thinking of the situation into which he had walked. It seemed to him that Alice Reed had not told him all, or perhaps any, of the truth about her brother's illness, or his association with Dawson. He doubted if she knew it.

As for what Dawson planned, it was of a savage simplicity; the murder of his partner, the theft of his partner's find of gold, the capture of his sister. He counted on his own brutality to reduce the girl to a state of slavery in which she would have neither mind nor spirit left to denounce him by the time they reached civilization.

The only stumbling block in Dawson's path was Kent himself. In the fight that would come tomorrow, Bull's first shot would be for him. Kent's grin was mirthless, but not unhappy as he thought of that fight. Lying relaxed but alert, he was consciously preparing for it.

The lantern burned low, flickered, and went out. Kent could hear Paul Reed moving restlessly, muttering in his sleep. He wished Reed would keep still. The sounds he made covered any sounds that might come from Bull.

With the light burning, Kent could have seen Bull's first move in his bunk from where he lay. In the abysmal blackness of the hut, he had to depend on his ears to warn him if Bull, pretending sleep, was actually waiting to spring a surprise on him in the dark.

The muttering from Reed's bunk grew louder. Words poured from the boy's lips in a meaningless, half articulate jumble, high pitched and querulous. Kent heard him sit up, then the shuffle of his feet as Reed stumbled from his bunk.

Kent rose to his knees. He could see nothing, but the sound told him that Reed was making for the door of the hut. As Kent sprang up to intercept him, the tall, thin figure darkened the faint dimness that marked the opening.

"Reed!" he called softly. He dared not startle the sleepwalker. There was danger in suddenly waking a man in Reed's nervous condition. The shock might completely unbalance him. Yet Kent could not let the boy wander off into the bush. He could hear Reed's mutter as the sleeper stumbled down the path.

"Reed! Wait—I'm coming with you!" Kent called as he hurried after the shuffling figure under the faint starlight. Reed was moving incredibly swiftly, and Kent broke into a run. Already the sleeper was nearing the edge of the mine pit where Dawson had been digging. With a spurt of speed Kent reached him and laid a guiding hand on his arm.

"It's this way, old man," he suggested gently, trying to turn Reed back toward the hut. "This is the way we're going. Come on."

Reed turned and stared at him with blank, open eyes that seemed to look through and beyond Kent. Suddenly his face contorted with horror.

"Look!" he screamed. "Look! He's got you!"

Before Kent could turn something struck the back of his head. The stars whirled for a split second, then Kent went down in a long crashing plunge into blackness.

KENT stirred and lifted eyelids heavy as if weighted with tons of lead. He was back in the hut. The first daylight was stealing in at the door. For a moment he thought he must have dropped to sleep.

The effort to move brought a sharp stab of pain that quickened his senses. He lay on his side, his body bent backward like a taut bow, heels lashed to hands behind him, arms wound in a snarl of rope.

Beside him lay Paul Reed, bound in the same cruel, muscle rending position. His face was white, his eyes open, staring at Kent. Not a sound of life broke the stillness. Nothing but the faint jungle rustlings, the scream of some far bird.

"I thought you were dead," Reed said dully. "Dawson's gone. He took Alice. There are ants stinging me."

A black stream a foot wide was moving swiftly across the floor toward them. It's head had reached Reed; and the full force of Dawson's having left them alive struck Kent. They were to be eaten alive as the blacks in the jungle had been. The picture of those quivering shreds of flesh that had once been men brought sweat out on Kent's body.

How long had he lain there like a log? Hours, perhaps. He tensed his muscles against his bonds—uselessly. He knew the sea too well to imagine a sailor making knots that wouldn't hold.

"Don't worry about Alice," he told Reed steadily. "Just let me get at these ropes, and we'll be after her, in no time."

Half inch by half inch he began to muscle himself along the floor, using his head and his cramped knees to push himself forward like a worm that has been cut in two. Gradually he propelled himself round Reed's body, then worked backward till the hands bound behind his back were touching Reed's hands.

His fingers were swollen to stiff numbness, but they explored the knot that bound Reed's hands to his feet. It was an intricate, clever knot; Kent's fingers recognized it. Working patiently, he fumbled at the knot till all sense and feeling went out of his stiff hands. They bungled at the knot helplessly, then relaxed, powerless.

Painfully Kent slewed his body round till his face pressed against the knot. With his strong teeth he worried the rope, tugging and pulling. His lips were cut and bleeding when the end came free. After that he tore furiously till the rope fell from Reed's wrists.

"That's done it!" he said through swollen lips. "Now buck up, Reed! Untie your feet and get a knife to cut me free!"

A shudder went through Reed. He sat up and faced Kent, heavy eyed.

"What's the use?" he said apathetically.

"Dawson took the guns, yours and mine. She—they've been gone an hour."

"Only an hour!" Then there was still a chance, a big chance! "Quick, man! We'll catch them! Snap out of it!"

The sharp command jolted Reed into action. He started tugging clumsily at his bound ankles.

"Hurry!" Kent urged. "Crawl to the kitchen and get a knife! There must be one! It's for Alice——"

On hands and knees the boy scuttled across the hut. Hope had come back into his eyes as he came back running, and slashed Kent's ropes. Kent stamped the blood back into his feet, and dashed off down the jungle path with Reed pounding at his heels, rope still tangled round Reed's neck.

"The river!" Reed shouted. "Make for the river! He'll cross it. The trail is down the other bank!"

DAYLIGHT struck through the thick growth as they plunged down the path Kent had struggled up the day before. He took the barriers of the fallen trees at a bound, landing sometimes sprawling on hands and knees in the slippery ooze, staggering for foothold and pelting on.

Fear, the fear of being too late to overtake the gorilla creature making off with Alice Reed, steeled every muscle in Kent's long body. Behind him Paul Reed raced, sure footed as a jungle bred native. It seemed hours to Kent before the booming of the river reached their ears. He flung out his arm to halt Reed.

"I sunk the boat on my way up," he said under his breath. "We'd better take to the bush. Bull has the guns. We've nothing but our hands. If he's trying to patch the dugout, we can jump him."

Reed nodded, and they slipped into the matted growth beside the path. Crawling, they pushed cautiously toward the clearing where the boat had been moored. The bush seemed filled with a thousand ominous rustlings; but no sound of Bull or of the girl reached their strained ears.

The clearing was just ahead. Kent parted the tangle of vines and stared through. He motioned Reed forward and they rose and stepped into the open space. No rope end dangled from the mooring stake. The dugout was gone.

"Fool! Fool!" Kent muttered bitterly. "Why didn't I set it adrift? I thought I might need it later. Well, come on!"

He turned on his heel and started down the bank. Reed did not follow him. He seemed stupefied, stunned into hopelessness by the blow of not finding his sister. Kent came back and caught his arm.

"Buck up, Reed!" he commanded sharply. "You've got all this rope on you. We may use it on Dawson yet!"

The boy pulled himself up with a jerk, and they crawled back to where the path ended on the river bank. Through the gap in the bush the foam flecked stretch of seething water spread before them. Half way across the river, utterly out of reach, they saw the dugout.

Bull Dawson was paddling furiously. His great back arched as his powerful arms swept the crazy craft against the current that tore at it, tossing it like a leaf. He was barely holding his own against the terrific force of the torrent in midstream, making little headway toward the far shore. The twisting greenish swirls seemed to hurl him back toward the jutting rocks between each stroke, as if determined to batter him to bits before tossing him like useless débris over the fall below.

In the prow of the dugout sat Alice Reed. With gritted teeth Kent saw that her arms were bound to her sides, her head drooped helplessly on her breast. At sight of her a hoarse cry sprang to Reed's lips.

The girl started up, stumbling to her knees in the flimsy craft. Bull Dawson's head jerked up, and he missed his stroke. The dugout rocked crazily, spun half round and darted toward where the water snarled round the black, upraised head of a jagged rock.

"Sit down!" Bull roared, paddling wildly. "Are you crazy? You'll have us over——"

As his voice boomed across the brawling water, they saw the dugout strike the rock and shatter. Kent was already tearing off his boots. As he slid into the water, his cool eye marked the spot where Alice went down, bound and helpless.

The strong eddy caught him, pulling at him with the drag of a mill race as he struck out across the current. His head came up and he shook it like a dog as the spray slashed across his eyes. The rush of the water had swung the dugout back toward the shore, lessening the distance; but it seemed to Kent that dozens of rocks surged above the surface, all black, all jagged, all alike in the spinning whirl of weltering water.

"Up stream!" he heard Reed shout. "Up! You're being swept down!"

With every ounce of force in him Kent battled against the mass of water hurtling down on him, beating, pounding, throttling him. Undercurrents sucked at his body, dashing him against unseen boulders. Arms and legs moving like steel pistons, he forced himself up and on through seconds that seemed like hours. Was he gaining? A shout ahead startled him.

"I'm here!" it was Dawson's bellow. "This way! I got her!"

Dawson's bullet head appeared close to a rocky spur against which the water spouted. One beefy arm was thrown round the rock to which he clung. The other hand grasped the girl's bronze-gold hair by which he held her pallid face just above the whirl of water.

Kent surged toward her with a mighty spurt, grasping at her shoulders. But Dawson jerked her out of his reach with an oath.

"Sure you would! Take her off and leave me stranded! Not likely!" he shouted menacingly. "You take us both ashore, or you'll take me alone! I'll hold her under, and you can't stop me. I can't swim, but I can float, and with you to tow us we'll all get there. Otherwise you go back alone. See?"

Kent said nothing. The current had swept him round the rock, and he grabbed for a hand hold and missed. He crashed against an ugly spike that jutted toothlike under the water, and his legs wound round it instinctively. Dawson roared boisterously as Kent's head went under, but it came up again within arm's reach of the girl.

Kent's hold was precarious at best. He twisted his legs round the slippery sliver of water worn rock and thrust his long body out at an angle toward where the girl's head floated above the surface. His hands just met on the hairy wrist to the hand that held her.

Every muscle braced to the strain. Slowly, irresistibly, he bent Bull's powerful forearm up, back, over. The huge forearm swelled in its effort to withstand that unbearable pressure. A howl of anguish burst from Bull's throat, and his fingers relaxed their hold as the shoulder joint cracked to the tearing of ligaments and his arm fell dislocated to his side.

Kent caught the girl as the current whipped her past him. With a swift thrust of his legs he turned on his back. She came to the surface with his hands under her shoulders supporting her body.

Not one word had passed her tightly closed lips in the few moments that had passed since Kent's coming had brought hope to her. Now the calmness of her voice startled him.

"Let me go," she said clearly, above the din of the rushing water. "You'll never make it in this current with me. Go without me, please, to Paul! Or we'll both go over the fall!"

Kent wasted no breath in answering, but he tightened his grip on her shoulders reassuringly. Swimming on his back, he had no idea whether he was even making for the bank, and he thought it very possible that she was right. They would be swept over the fall.

THEY seemed to be whirling like corks, faster and faster as the sweep of the current caught the girl's submerged body, striving to tear it from his hold. He was kicking out desperately, but the roar of the fall boomed louder in his ears. The fight to keep afloat made the blood pound deafeningly in his head. His chest seemed bursting.

Something whirled over his head, slashed across his face. Kent threw up a hand, hoping they had been swept under some trailing vine that would hold. His fingers closed on an end of rope.

"Hang on! Can you keep up twenty feet more?" Reed's voice reached him. "For God's sake hang on to her!"

It was the rope he had thrown off as he jumped for the water. Kent had it twisted round one arm, while with the other he held the girl's head above water. Half drowned, Reed dragged them to the bank. Kent lay there panting while the boy fell to slashing the rope that bound his sister's arms, rubbing and chafing her hands.

"I'm all right, Paul, it's all—all—" She fell to sobbing quietly, her head bowed on her knees, her face hidden in her shower of wet, silky hair. Kent turned his face away, his eyes resolutely fixed on the boiling welter of the river.

Across the water the roars of Bull Dawson still rang hoarsely. His hold on the rock seemed weakening, for Kent could just see his face above the waves.

A comparatively narrow stretch of water lay between Dawson and life; a stretch of flooded space as impassable as a whole angry ocean to the sailor who could not swim.

Kent rose to his feet and picked up the rope Reed had dropped on the bank, measuring its length with his eye. There was a grim set to his jaw, and the glint in his eyes was like the light on gray ice.

"Dawson! Look alive! Rope coming over! Get your head up!"

Kent had run a loop in the end of the rope and coiled it over his arm. It was a long cast. He swung the rope, and it snaked out across the turbulent water.

Dawson heaved himself upward with a mighty surge to meet the writhing loop. It hovered, fell, and Kent felt it tighten to the pull of a weight on the end.

"Turn on your back! Take a breath! Float!" he shouted, as he began pulling in hand over hand. "Keep afloat! I'll get you yet—alive, damn you!"

The rope was coming in, heavily weighted. The pull on Kent's weary arms was terrific. He scanned the water with narrowed eyes; but he could not see Dawson.

The rope cut obliquely down into the water. It came in with jerks and bumps, sliding and halting like a ship dragging her anchor. Kent's muscles cracked as he hauled. Sweat poured from his face. Foot by foot it came—a leaden burden. With a final heave he brought it out on the bank.

The thing that came up at the end of the rope made Kent glance quickly behind him. Alice Reed's head was still bowed, her face hidden. He gestured silently to Reed. Then he bent over the quivering mass, beaten and smashed out of human semblance, that had been Bull Dawson.

"What is it?" Reed asked. His eyes fell on Dawson. "Good God! What did you——"

Kent shook his head.

"The rocks in the river bed did it. Pounded him to death. I tried to get him alive. He said he could float, but——"

He stooped over the gruesome object, knife in hand. From the huge corpse he cut three belts that sagged heavily round the hips.

"My money belt," he said as he held them up, "and your gold—Guinea gold. That's what sunk him. Help me with this. Your sister mustn't see."

Together they slipped the body of Bull Dawson into the river. The swirling greenish water closed over it, chuckling. Paul Reed stood staring down as the momentary ripple slipped swiftly away downstream. As Kent watched him the lines seemed to fade from his worn young face. He took a deep breath and turned to Kent with boyish abruptness.

"Look here," he said huskily, "you've saved my sister and me from worse things than you know about. That brute had me in a cleft stick. I wouldn't have cared, but Alice——"

Kent put a hand on the boy's shoulder, and the bowed head came up.

"I want to tell you," his eyes met Kent's squarely. "I—I took some money back in Sydney, and he knew about it. I came up here to find gold to pay it back; he followed and blackmailed me. Threatened to disgrace father's name. But I'd have gone back and faced jail, or killed him and hung for it, before I'd have had him lay a hand on Alice! You've saved us—that. Now I can pay back, with my half of that gold. The other half is yours, of course. And I don't even know your name. But you've been a partner——"

He thrust out his hand eagerly, and Kent gripped it. The grim look had come back into his leather brown face. He pushed the heavy belt toward Reed with his foot.

"That gold is your sister's," he said. "I got what I came up here for—Dawson. I've been trailing him a long time."

"Trailing him? Then you're in the police! And all the time he was hounding me, the police wanted him! What for?"

"Murder, an old murder," Kent said quietly. "But I'm not in the police, I'm in the Navy. For five years I've spent my shore leave hunting Dawson. I'd have got him if it had taken twenty!"

"But why?" Reed asked. "If it wasn't your job——"

"It was," Kent said sternly. "The man he killed was my brother."

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

ONE evening, not long gone, chance brought together a convivial group in the rooms of a certain writer of adventure stories. There were two or three other authors, an artist famous for his pictures of ships and the sea, a couple of newspaper correspondents, and one solitary editor. It was a strictly sociable occasion, and I do not feel free to identify the group. Except one of them. I was the lone editor, a veritable Daniel among the lions.

I wish it were possible to pass along the wealth of anecdote and reminiscence that grew with the evening. There were tales of world rovers, of kings and queens and beachcombers, of gallantry at sea and adventure in a hundred ports. One had been a soldier in the old Regular Army. He spoke of the Border, of the Philippines, of the Far East. Another had served before the mast on windjammers and won his ticket in steam. He told of Suez, of Cape Stiff, of the Barbary Coast. A third had seen two dozen wars all over the globe, as a war correspondent. He described, with ironic detachment of a newspaperman, the futile tragedy and ghastly humor of forgotten battle fields.

They were all unhurried; it seemed that the hours were infinite. But dawn crept upon us, and the gathering broke up. Many fascinating stories perforce went untold. We resolved firmly to get together again at the first opportunity, perhaps to meet real often. Such congenial company must not go unenjoyed.

But we never assembled again. Such is the way of life.

This past week greetings have come from two of those men, under foreign postage. I know the whereabouts of the others, from various sources. They are scattered abroad from Capri to Surabaya. They do not know themselves, it seems, exactly when they may head this way again.

I would not be surprised if, by one of those charming coincidences Fate arranges every so often, this group should one day all encounter, let us say, in front of the Café de la Paix. If they do, I hope that someone, when the enthusiastic greetings have subsided, will pause a moment to dispatch a cable to the missing member of the party. I think the missing member will close his desk with a bang and take the next boat.

True, he will have little to say. But he will make a fine listener.

I want to hear the rest of those stories. . . .

A COMPANY'S CONVERSION

SPEAKING of stories, here is a casual and hardboiled anecdote from one observing newspaper man who has seen a good bit of the world. It goes to you without comment, for none is needed.

Infidels and disbelievers, I suppose, there were in the A. E. F., but none I am sure could compare for sincerity with Sergeant Blank of the Forty-Third Balloon Company. He was a grizzled veteran of the Regular Army, a real old-timer and a good N. C. O., though congenitally an agitator. As long as his proselyting did not affect military discipline, his captain didn't care what his beliefs were, Shinto or Mohammedism. And so, there in the mud and sudden death of the Argonne, with iron rations and days when even such failed to come through, with cooties running rampant on every human body and sheer exhaustion engulfing all, Sergeant Blank found many disciples for his doctrine of futility. Confessed converts to atheism were limited in number, but I think that almost the entire enlisted personnel were more or less politely impressed with Sergeant Blank's arguments. It was something new, something diverting anyway, and he put on a good show.

The Forty-Third Company marched into a small ravine near Ivoiry late one afternoon and their movement was spotted by enemy observers. That night and on succeeding nights Fritz sent over his hate, 77's in the *varies*, high explosive, shrapnel and gas. Fox-holes were dug deeper and deeper as many suffered minor wounds. No fatalities were recorded until one night an H.E. shell scored a direct hit on the fox-hole in which Sergeant Blank was sleeping. He never wakened. The concussion threw his body fifty feet without leaving a mark.

Came God's sunlight with the dawn, and the evidence of His wrath visited on an unbeliever lying under a blanket on a stretcher. The Forty-Third Balloon Company, to a man, got religion that day. It was reflected in the subdued voices and humility of the troops. The Golden Rule superseded Army Regulations. It lasted for several days.

But as I mentioned, the Argonne in late October of 1918 was a hard place to sustain humble piety. One soldier, to whom righteousness was becoming irksome, became inquisitive. He recalled that another soldier ordinarily shared the fox-hole of the late Sergeant Blank. He sought out this youth.

"Where were you when that shell hit?" demanded the doubter.

"I was over with the Seventh Company shooting craps in an old Boche dugout," he answered, not without some satisfaction.

"I knew it," cried the doubter. "The sergeant's being bumped off don't prove a thing!"

Under the stimulus of this later information, righteousness backslid that night in the Forty-Third Balloon Company. There were those who held that Sergeant Blank had paid a penalty. But the majority, oh, a very substantial majority, maintained that crap shooters enjoyed a very special protection from Above. They had proof. And it came about that while atheism in the Forty-Third Balloon Company died with its leader, crap shooting as a fervent rite reached heights probably unsurpassed in the A. E. F.

Samuel Taylor Moore

MEN OF THE SNOW COUNTRY

MOST of you, I am sure, have read the stories of WILLIAM MERRIAM ROUSE before, some of them in the EVERYBODY'S of years gone by. They have been tales of the North mostly, minor epics of a gallant and kindly people, in whom courage is a proud birthright.

The Blockade, in this issue, is Mr. Rouse's first story in the new EVERYBODY'S. He has something to say of the setting which is well worth passing along.

The Blockade deals with a people whom I liked at first acquaintance, and grew to like still better as the acquaintance progressed—the wood choppers of the Laurentians. These *bûcherons* were as simple in their methods of living as they were courteous and kindly in their dealings with their fellow men. That was my experience a matter of ten years ago when I was picking up fiction material along the Côte de Beaupré, from Quebec to Ste. Anne and back from the St. Lawrence where the blue mountains roll up to the sky and there were no villages.

"Enter, *monsieur?* You are in your own house!" It brings a pleasant glow to the heart to be greeted thus by strangers; and the greeting gains emphasis when the snow lies six feet deep under one's *racquettes* and it is thirty below zero outside the cabin. White snow and black forest and a vast stillness broken only as a branch cracks under the mighty hands of the forest; inside an ancient "stove of two bridges," something to eat, and smiling, interested, amiable faces ready to listen or talk, with almost as many gestures as words.

The something to eat might be cold fat pork and bread, beans cooked with much mustard, pea soup, tea . . . A stew of fresh beef would be luxury. Over everything a thick atmosphere, heavy with warmth and *tabac Canadien*. To a man who has just finished a six hour march with a pack, and helped the sled dog up the hills, this is solid comfort.

From the little, two-men *chantiers* to the big camps with a dozen or fifteen choppers and a boss, I found the same good cheer. Where there was a woman—usually the wife of one of the *bûcherons*—there was always an effort at housekeeping, which could not have been easy with walls of unhewn logs and a welter of men and dogs.

French Canada has given me a great many stories but it is a cultivated fiction field. The one I grew up in, unconscious that it might some day produce stories for me, was the Adirondacks. When I was a youngster I trailed the river drivers for the excitement; followed the drive by day and in the evening loafed around a big box stove and listened to mighty tales by mighty men.

The clank of canthooks and the thud of spiked boots, the roar of swollen waters and the pounding of black logs—these were writing their record on my mind for a later use in fiction. Of course I did not guess it at the time; I only knew that I liked to see a jam go up in a thunder of dynamite and thrilled to the daring of a cheerful giant who played poker with four aces hidden in his long hair. It was a humorous life.

Cities have not been able to dim the memory of the river, trimmed with white foam and carrying death for the unwary. Nor have they effaced the upstanding men who could work all day in ice water and dance half the night at what was jovially known as a "kitchen tunk." Immune, they were, to the wear and tear of life, including hard cider and arguments with feet and fists.

William Merriam Rouse

THE RETURN OF THE WANDERER

HERE a true daughter of the West, returning from other lovely hands, speaks of her home country with an appreciation only keener for her absence.

Last winter I wrote you from a South Sea bound steamer—just a friendly little handshake—and I don't know whether I was pleasurably, or most embarrassedly, surprised, when I read my letter in the *Meeting Place*.

At any rate, I laughed!

Before I go further I'm going to say that I do enjoy the stories in EVERYBODY'S but that I always turn first of all to the *Meeting Place*. You do have the knack of making it friendly and informal, like a group of friends chatting together. Several months ago I remarked to one of your he men readers that the magazine had changed a lot and he said fervently, "Yes, thank the Lord! It's an honest to God magazine, now!" Anyone I mention it to seems to agree with him.

I believe I enjoyed *The Desert Moon Mystery* more because it was a story of Nevada. Anyone who has lived there cannot forget. True, there is a lure of the tropics but, to me, anyway, it is not nearly so potent as the lure of the sage. A setting sun behind a graceful coconut palm makes a beautiful picture, yes. But no more beautiful than the same sun slipping behind purple hills and turning bare, brown peaks to sofest pink. And no haunting music can thrill me like the silvery throated call of a freight train slowly climbing the grade. Queer, isn't it, that no matter what beauties we seek on the wide world's horizon we never believe it is quite so wonderful as home? . . .

Before I close I want to ask you why you apologized for your stories. They were good, and I cannot imagine anyone being more capable as an editor, than a writer.

Dora Folsom Martin

A NOTE ON RUSTLERS

THE author of our feature novelette has a word to say about the story. And speaking confidentially, RAYMOND S. SPEARS' letters are among the most interesting I receive. The exhaustive research he conducts into his fiction settings has given him a rich fund of fascinating anecdote and information. He merely hints here at the vast lore he has collected of the stock ranges.

The Killers of Blizzard Basin comes closer to modern cattle and sheep stealing practice than in most yarns of the kind—the piecemeal "bleeding" or bit-by-bit carrying away of beef and mutton. This can be done as long as it isn't suspected strongly enough for active measures to be taken against the steady drain. Usually, now, automobile truck transportation is used, several very considerable instances of steady raiding by such means having developed in recent years. But I left this type of butcher shop fence business as it was after the herd captures which, generally speaking, ended with brand inspection during the '90s. During the War, though, big herds were run up from Mexico clandestinely under various circumstances.

For the rest, I avoided too closely identifying the terrain with actualities—and probably mixed a bit of the North with some of the South conditions and drew a pretty sharp line between cattle and sheep terrain up Blizzard Valley.

But the yarn is fiction. . . .

Spears

And darn good fiction, at that!

OVER YONDER IN AUSTRALIA

EVERYBODY'S certainly manages to get around, doesn't it? Here is a message from one of us on the other side of the world.

Now, apropos of the first paragraph in the following letter, I have heard a rumor to the effect that editors, when they retire, are placed in the Smithsonian Institute, in a room adjoining the Middle Paleolithic fossils. Any such statement plainly is libel. Gladly I offer this lady's testimony in refutation.

I once read something in the *Meeting Place* to the effect that editors are supposed to be rather distant beings—were office furnishings along with the desks and chairs. Well, for myself, I hardly ever expected to find one who was actually human and, furthermore, sincere in his interest in the readers of the tales he published. May I say that you have caused me to change my mind.

I think your job must be rather a pleasant one. Between the stories you have to pass judgment on, and the letters you receive from both readers and writers, I should imagine that you would find yourself taking a friendly interest in the peoples of all the far and near corners of the earth. Human nature is about the most interesting institution I know of, and I suppose that the natures of your writers must reflect more or less through their stories or letters.

I do wish I could supply you with a good Aussie story for EVERYBODY'S. I shall, I suppose, continue to be the only exception to the rule of silence which prevails from the direction of Australia.

I cannot say the same to you, as one is reminded of the United States daily in this part of the world. If Chicago is having an election, we get all the terrible details of the general riot dished up to us per the medium of the newspapers. If a dam bursts in California—well, we know all about it the very next day. If a tornado tears up a few of the Middle West States—well, we get all that too.

At school I learned all about "the reason why" of your Fourth July celebrations. All about the tea tipping, and so forth, in 1776. At least the war was in 1776, anyhow. The beginnings may have been at an earlier date.

I don't think that I could name all of the United States, but I do know that I had to learn all the geography and draw maps and mark in mountains, rivers, towns, etc., besides hearing all about the chappie who said, "Father, I cannot tell a lie," etc.

Now, how much did you learn about Australia, may I ask?

Vera Moore

I would not care to be quizzed, off hand, on my intimate knowledge of Australia. Most of us Americans are only too ignorant of our own country to begin with, I guess. Undeniably, our conception of Australia is vague. But one fact is impressed on all our minds. Ask the average Yank what kind of soldier came from down yonder in Australia, and he'll tell you about the biggest, heartiest, most arrogantly independent fighting man that ever came over the pike.

SHOP TALK

QUITE a lot of letters this month. I'm only sorry there isn't room for everybody to talk up here in meeting. And I feel almost embarrassed that they are so flattering. Someone, really, should have heaved a brick or two this way. Fights are, after all, rather exciting . . . In the office here we have been looking forward to the publication of this issue. We think it one of the best that has appeared. I shall make no further comment, for I am confident of your judgment on that. . . . Next month, Ared White returns with a remarkable novelette of Sulu in the old days, when the American forces of occupation waited day after day for the decision of the Moro datos, for peace or a war of annihilation. The outcome lay in the hands of one young officer who penetrated alone to the stronghold of the Sultan of Sulu. *Sons of Allah* is his story. He lived in a stirring time. . . There are, in addition, two novelettes, by R. W. Alexander and Anthony M. Rud, and eight unusual short stories. . . I must mention here an incident which happened in the office recently, one to which can be attached a great deal of significance. I was ushering out one visitor when a second arrived. In the midst of mingled farewells and greetings the two men observed each other, bowed slightly, and continued on, one departing down the hall, the other entering my office. The new arrival spoke of the departed visitor with the instinctive recognition and respect of one seafaring man for another. He said the man looked a capable sort, one well worth knowing. I smiled and told what I knew of him. And my second visitor's respect for the other increased. The first was a German who had served on the famous raider *Emden* at a time when the second commanded a British war craft scouring the seas in search of her. The first finished the war in an American prison camp, after being captured at Guam in another German ship the day after we declared war. The second, on Armistice Day, was skipper of a Q-boat with a several *unterseeboots* to his credit. These two had been prepared, at one time, to wipe each other cheerfully off the map. Now they exchanged glances and recognized between them the gallant fellowship of the sea. They had done their jobs at the time appointed, and there was no rancor or malice left. . . It seems that the men who fight our wars suffer least from the taint of hatred.

William Corcoran

The News of Next Month

SONS *of* ALLAH

By ARED WHITE

Out of his world wandering years this distinguished author brings a tale set in another strange corner of the world—a novelette of Sulu, where the Moro datos once debated annihilation of the gallant Yankee outposts in the jungle.

* * *

THE MISSIONARY

By R. W. ALEXANDER

A novelette of the savage Solomon Islands, where the wreckage of all manhood drifted, and where cruelty and courage were twin virtues.

SMOKE SETTLES

By ANTHONY M. RUD

A novelette of a death ring which ruled a Western mountain mining town—and of the one reckless rider who gave it challenge.

* * *

AND EIGHT SHORT STORIES

MILLARD WARD spins a yarn of a thrilling hour in a South American revolution in "The Q Buoy"; RAYMOND S. SPEARS tells a quaint and striking Western story, "Scienterific"; THOMAS THURSDAY returns with another merry tale, "The Wages of Sinclair". CARL CLAUSEN, RAOUL F. WHITFIELD and HOWARD R. MARSH are among the other authors present, and CAPTAIN DINGLE adds several gripping chapters to "Sea Worthy".